Courtney Crumrin

Volume Two

The Coven of Mystics

Ted Naifeh

This book belongs to

_____

Courtney Crumrin

Volume Two

The Coven of Mystics

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Volume Two

The Coven of Mystics

Written & Illustrated by

TED NAIFEH

Colored by

WARREN WUCINICH

Original Series edited by

JAMES LUCAS JONES

Collection edited by

JILL BEATON

Design by

KEITH WOOD

Oni Press, Inc.

publisher, Joe Nozemack

editor in chief, James Lucas Jones

director of marketing, Cory Casoni

art director, Keith Wood

operations director, George Rohac

editor, Jill Beaton

editor, Charlie Chu

digital prepress lead, Troy Look

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For Kelly

'ILLSBOROUGH'S A SAFE PLACE TO RAISE YER KIDDIES, SO LONG AS THEY KNOW TO STAY OUT O' THE WOODS.
NASTY THINGS LURKIN' ABOUT.
LIKE ME, FER INSTANCE!
Squeee!
MOST O' THE LITTLE TYKES LEARN TO KEEP AWAY.
BUT YOUNG COURTNEY CRUMRIN, SHE'S A DIFFERENT STORY.
WILLFUL LASS.
SHE THINKS SHE'S GOT THE BETTER O' OL' BUTTERWORM.
SUPPOSE SHE'S RIGHT, TOO.
A GIRL WITH 'ER POWERS GOT NOTHIN' TO FEAR FROM AN OL' BUG-A-BOO LIKE ME.
COURSE, THERE'S ALWAYS A BIGGER BUG-A-BOO.

Chapter One

HEAR ME, DARK AND DREADFUL ONES, HORRENDOUS CHILDREN 'NEATH COLD STONE.

RELEASE THY MOST ACCURSED SON, TO SERVE MY NEED AND MINE ALONE.

AWAKEN, FIEND FROM DEPTHS UNKNOWN, I BID THEE, RISE FROM SUNLESS LANDS,

TO RENDER FLESH FROM BLOODY BONE,

TO FEAST ON GORE AT MY COMMAND.

HEH HEH.

YEH SHOULD'VE BEEN FASTER, BROTHER.

>ULP<

OH BUGGER!

"MISS CRUMRIN?"

HMM!

WHA'!?!

I'M SORRY TO BORE YOU, MISS CRUMRIN.

BUT SURELY AMERICAN HISTORY ISN'T THAT DULL.

MUST BE THE WAY YOU TEACH IT THEN...

WHAT WAS THAT?

SORRY, STAYED UP LATE. HOMEWORK.

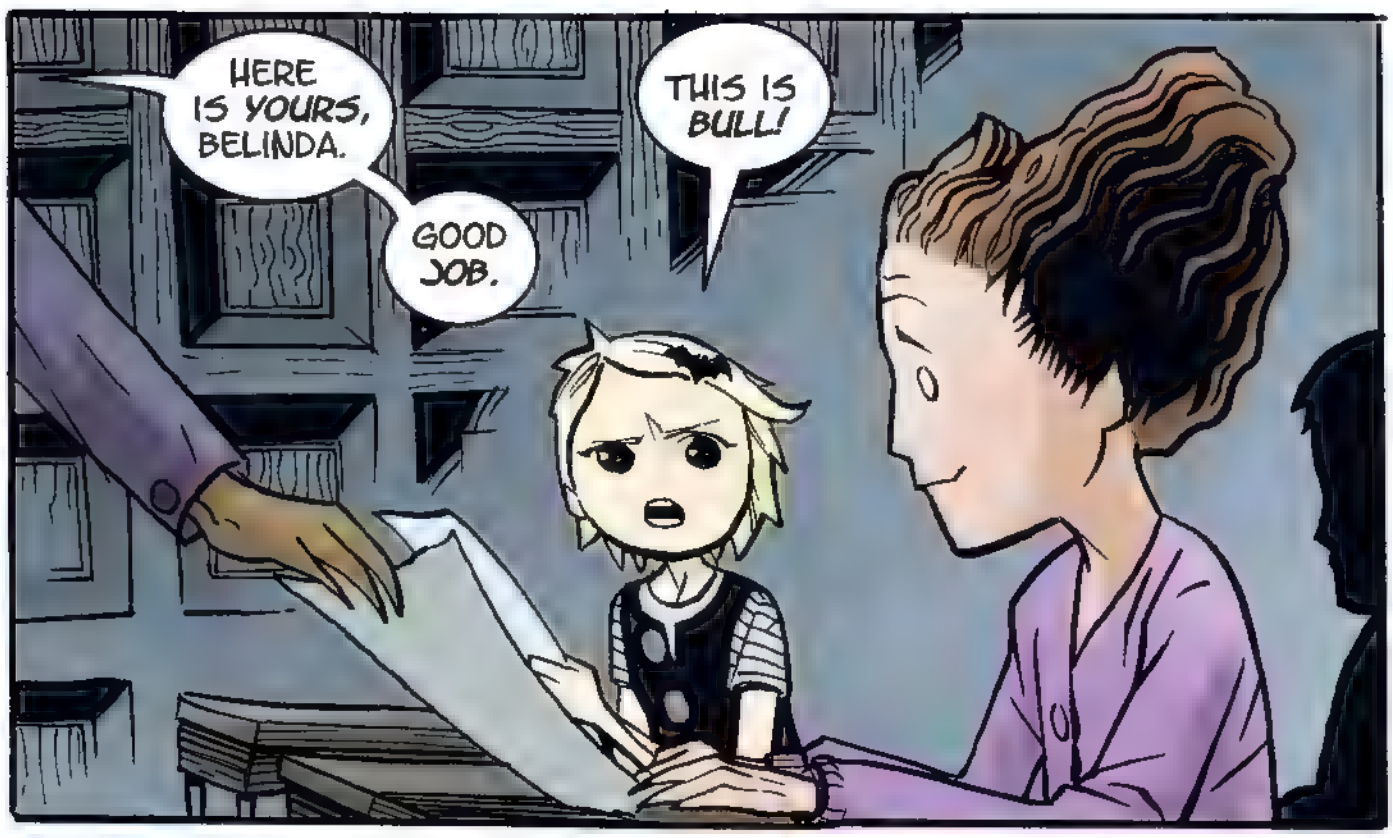
CCRUMRIN

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES I CAN ONLY BE SO SYMPATHETIC.

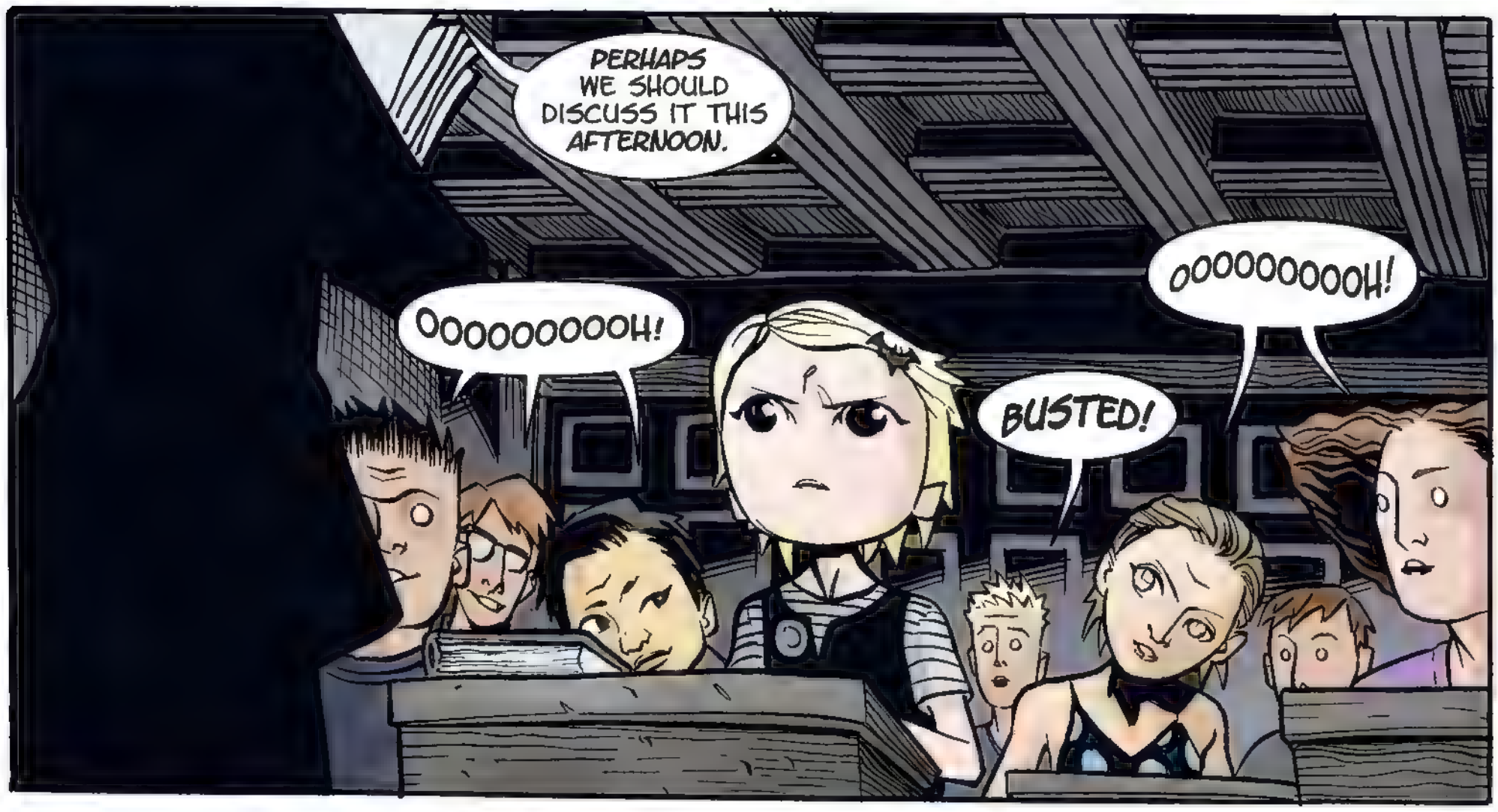
I SEE.

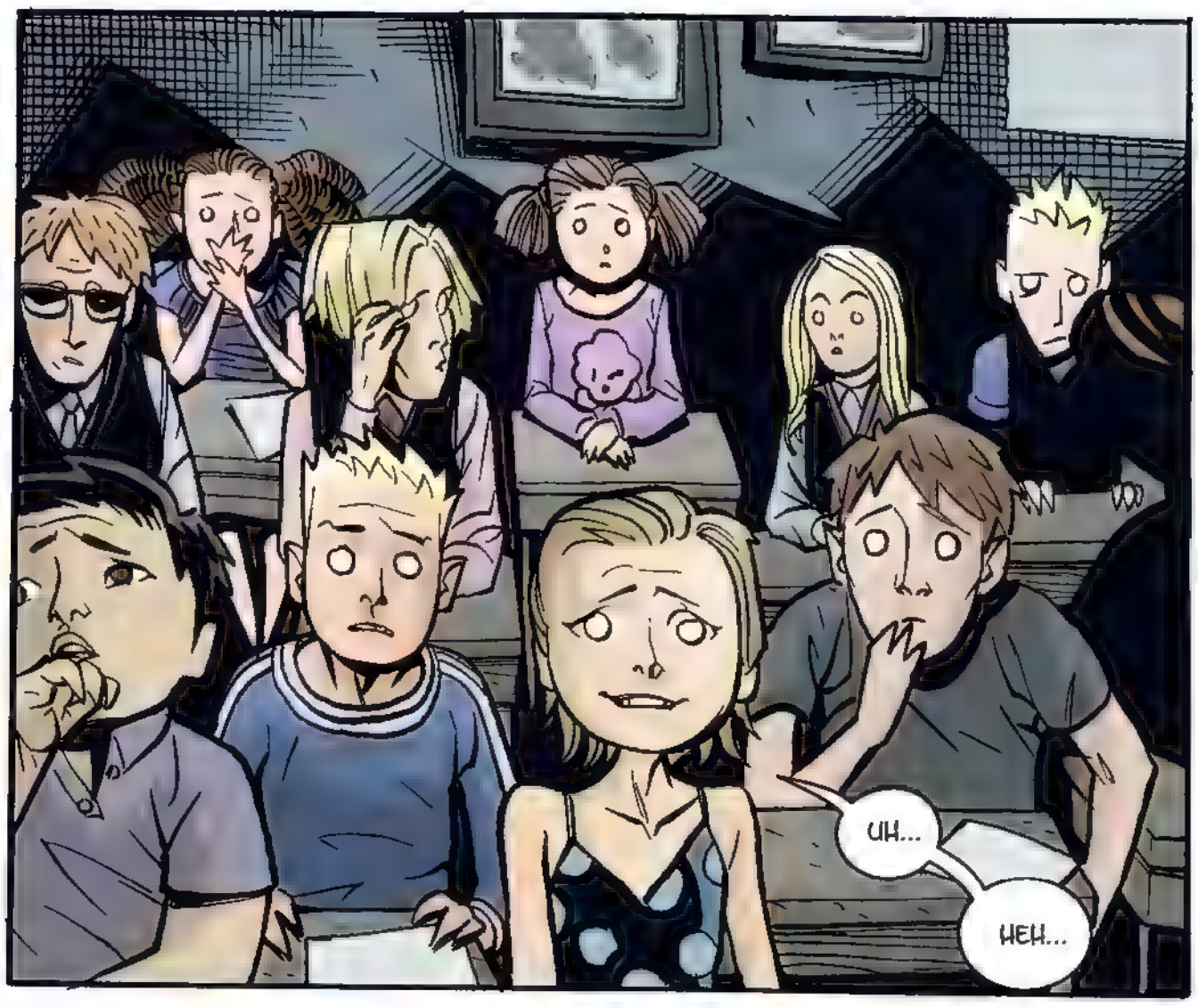
WHAT'S THIS!?!

A ZERO.


HERE IS YOURS, BELINDA.
GOOD JOB.
THIS IS BULL!

IS IT?


PERHAPS WE SHOULD DISCUSS IT THIS AFTERNOON.
OOOOOOOOOH!
BUSTED!
OOOOOOOOOH!


UH...
HEH...

IT WAS NOW TWO WEEKS INTO THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR, AND COURTNEY WAS BEGINNING TO NOTICE THAT HER NEW TEACHER, MISS CRISP, WAS A DREADFUL NUISANCE.

THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH THE HOMEWORK, OF COURSE. THE COMPLEX COCKTAIL OF ENCHANTMENTS HAD REQUIRED WEEKS OF RESEARCH, BUT NOW A BEWITCHED BELINDA BLOOM HANDED IN TWO COPIES OF HOMEWORK EVERY DAY, ONE WITH COURTNEY'S NAME ON IT.

THE ENSORCELLED GIRL NEVER EVEN REALIZED SHE WAS DOING IT. AND COURTNEY WAS NOW FREE TO DEVOTE HER FULL ATTENTION TO HER GROWING OBSESSION, HER UNCLE'S LIBRARY OF WITCHCRAFT.

SHE HAD NO INTENTION OF ALLOWING THIS MEDDLESOME WOMAN TO RUIN THINGS.

I HAPPEN TO *KNOW* THAT PAPER WAS *PERFECT*.

I HAD MY *PARENTS* DOUBLE-*CHECK* IT.

EXIT

OF *COURSE* IT WAS PERFECT. BELINDA'S HOMEWORK IS *ALWAYS* EXEMPLARY.

THE *IDEA* IS FOR YOU TO DO IT *YOURSELF*, AND ACTUALLY *LEARN* SOMETHING.

YOU THINK *BELINDA* DID MY HOMEWORK FOR ME? SHE DOESN'T EVEN *LIKE* ME.

YOU HAVE TO HAVE *FRIENDS* TO CHEAT THAT WAY.

OR *OTHER* POWERS OF PERSUASION.

I... DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE *TALKING* ABOUT.

YOU THINK I'M *BLACKMAILING*–

COURTNEY, I HAPPEN TO *KNOW* YOU'RE GETTING AN *EXCELLENT* EDUCATION FROM YOUR *UNCLE*.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS YOU'RE *NOT* GOING TO LEARN FROM *HIM*, AND YOU'LL *NEED* THEM TO LIVE IN THE *ORDINARY* WORLD.

DO YOU *UNDERSTAND?*

...

YES, MS. CRISP.

SCREW THE ORDINARY WORLD.

OVER THE LAST YEAR, COURTNEY CRUMRIN HAD SETTLED COMFORTABLY INTO HILLSBOROUGH. SHE FOUND THAT, GENERALLY, THE ENVIRONMENT WAS TO HER LIKING.

SHE'D MADE FEW FRIENDS AMONG THE LOCAL CHILDREN, AND THAT ALSO WAS TO HER LIKING, FOR THEY WERE NOT.

BUT THE STRANGE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD WAS AT LAST BEGINNING TO FEEL LIKE HOME.

WHAT'ER YEH *DOIN'* IN THE *WOODS*, LASS?

ARE YEH *THAT* DAFT?

YOU TRYING TO SCARE ME, BUTTERWORM?

I EAT SPOOKS LIKE *YOU* FOR *BREAKFAST*.

THAT *SO* NOW?

WELL, *I* AIN'T ONE T' BE TELLIN' A *POWERFUL WITCH* THE LIKES O' *YOU* WHAT'S *WHAT*.

THE FOREST STIRRED SUDDENLY, AND COURTNEY FELT AN AWFUL THRILL TICKLE HER SPINE.

SOMETHING WAS COMING.

YEH JUST KEEP ON *GOIN'* THEN, LASS.

BUT YEH *MIGHT* FIND A SPOOK THAT *STICKS* IN YER *THROAT* A BIT.

SOMETHING... UNSPEAKABLE.

WHATEVER IT WAS SOON PASSED BY, BUT COURTNEY HUDDLED IN THE UNDERGROWTH FOR AN HOUR AND SHIVERED UNCONTROLLABLY.

NOW HER ONLY THOUGHT WAS TO REACH HER UNCLE.

A RICH HELPING OF DREAD AND HORROR HAD BEEN STUFFED DOWN HER THROAT.

HER INSIDES WERE STILL WRITHING FROM THE EXPERIENCE, AND SHE BARELY NOTICED THE STRANGE MEN ON THE DOORSTEP.

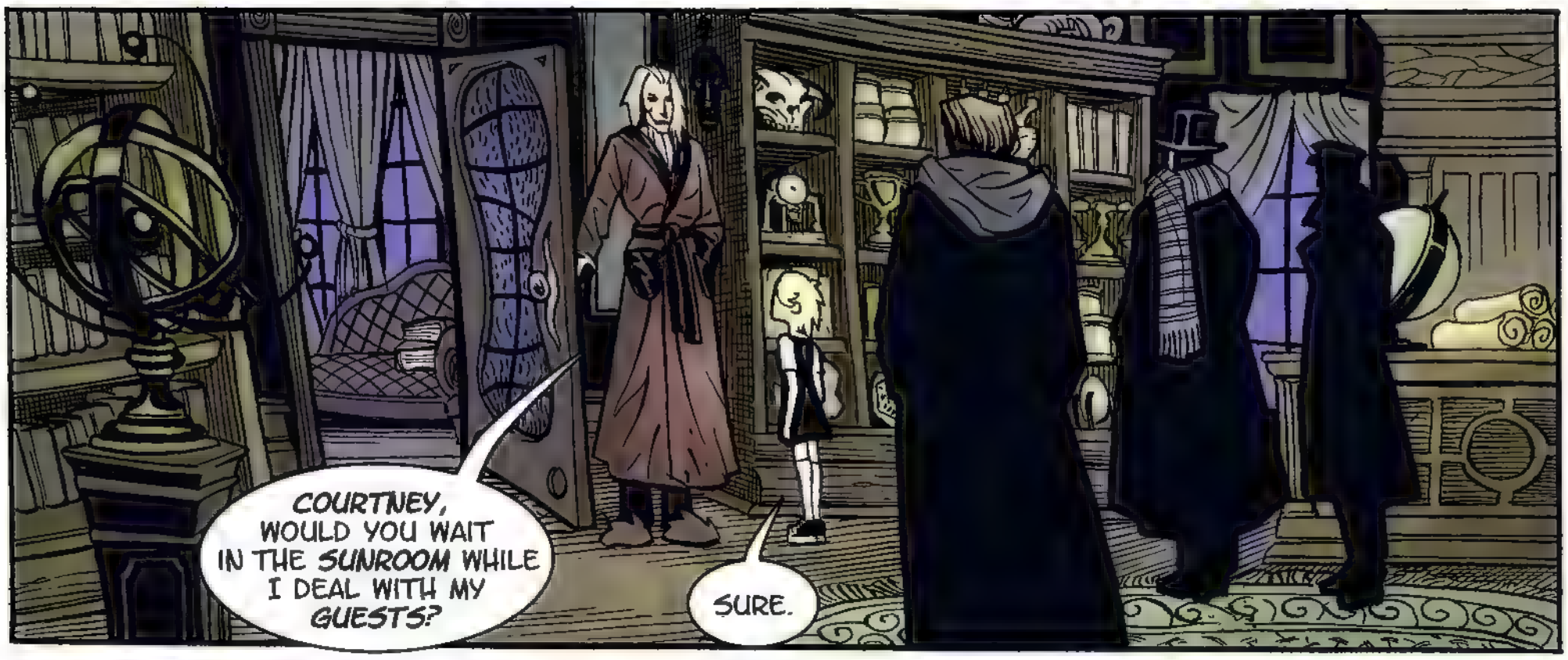
EXCUSE ME, MISS.

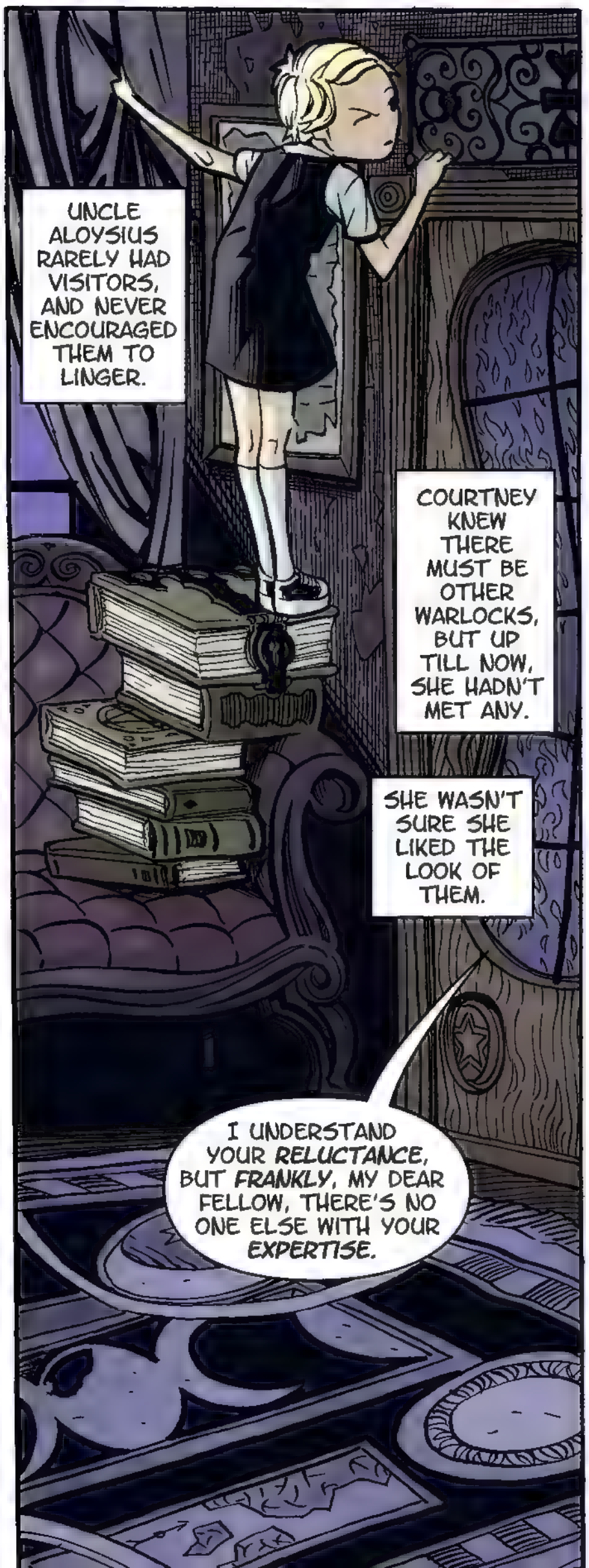
WE'RE LOOKING FOR *PROFESSOR CRUMRIN.*

UNCLE *A*, I NEED TO *TALK* TO YOU.

COME *IN*, MY DEAR.

GENTLEMEN.


COURTNEY, WOULD YOU WAIT IN THE SUNROOM WHILE I DEAL WITH MY GUESTS?
SURE.


UNCLE ALOYSIUS RARELY HAD VISITORS, AND NEVER ENCOURAGED THEM TO LINGER.
COURTNEY KNEW THERE MUST BE OTHER WARLOCKS, BUT UP TILL NOW, SHE HADN'T MET ANY.
SHE WASN'T SURE SHE LIKED THE LOOK OF THEM.
I UNDERSTAND YOUR RELUCTANCE, BUT FRANKLY, MY DEAR FELLOW, THERE'S NO ONE ELSE WITH YOUR EXPERTISE.

WHAT ABOUT MADAM HARKEN?
SHE KNOWS AS MUCH OF THESE MATTERS AS I. PERHAPS MORE.

PERHAPS.
BUT THE COMMITTEE HAS FAR MORE CONFIDENCE IN YOU.
I'M HONORED.

EXCELLENT. SO IT'S SETTLED.

INDEED. THANK YOU FOR *THINKING* OF ME.

I HOPE YOUR *NEXT* CHOICE PROVES MORE *FRUITFUL.*

YOU DON'T SEEM TO *APPRECIATE* THE *GRAVITY* OF THIS MATTER, ALOYSIUS.

PROFESSOR, WHAT ABOUT THE *MANDRAKES?* JACK AND THE *CHILDREN?*

JACK *MANDRAKE,* THE SELF-PROCLAIMED *GREATEST* WARLOCK OF THE *AGE?*

SURELY HE ISN'T IN ANY DANGER.

HAVE YOU NOT *HEARD?*

PROFESSOR, THEY'RE *DEAD.*

LAST *NIGHT.*

THE CHILDREN AS WELL?

HECTOR HERE IS DOING HIS *BEST,* BUT HE *JUST* ISN'T *EQUIPPED* TO DEAL WITH... *YOU* KNOW...

NIGHT THINGS.

NOT LIKE *THIS* ONE.

WHEN THEY'D GONE, ALOYSIUS CAME TO SPEAK WITH COURTNEY. HE LOOKED OLD AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT COURTNEY NOTICED, A BIT FRAIL.

NOW THEN, COURTNEY, WHAT WAS THE *TROUBLE?*

I JUST WANTED TO *TELL* YOU THAT...

I *SAW* SOMETHING. OUT IN THE *WOODS.*

SOMETHING *BAD.*

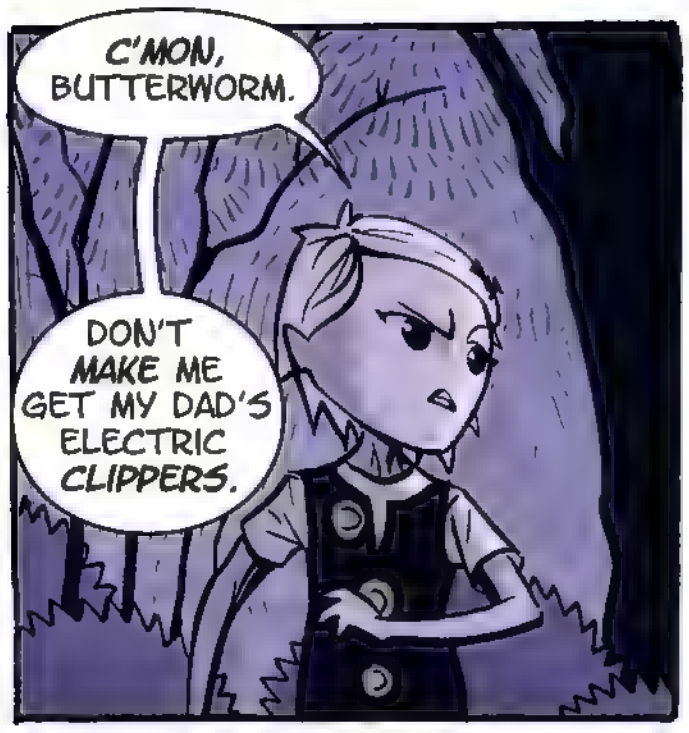
COURTNEY, I DON'T WANT YOU *GOING* INTO THE *WOODS* FOR A WHILE.

WHAT'S *OUT* THERE?

NOTHING YOU NEED TO *KNOW* ABOUT.

BUT COURTNEY CRUMRIN, AS YOU CAN WELL IMAGINE, WAS THE SORT OF PERSON THAT FELT SHE NEEDED TO KNOW EVERYTHING.

BUTTERWORM!


C'MON, BUTTERWORM.
DON'T MAKE ME GET MY DAD'S ELECTRIC CLIPPERS.

WHAT YEH WANT?
AND KEEP YER VOICE DOWN, GIRL, FER GOODNESS SAKE.

WHAT IS IT, BUTTERWORM? WHAT'S OUT THERE?

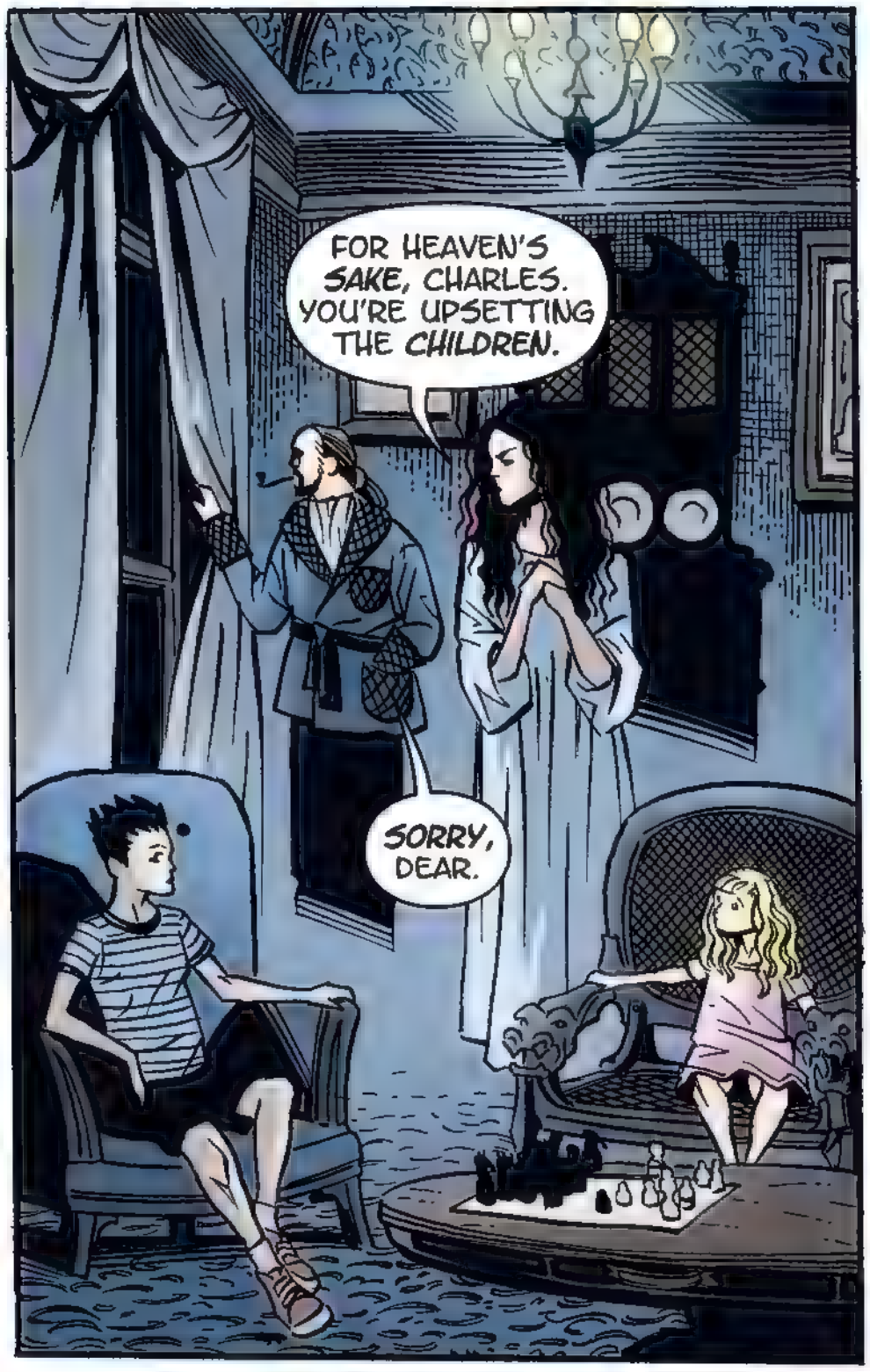
OH, 'IM? THAT'S OL' TOMMY RAWHEAD.
BEEN AWHILE SINCE HE COME OUT O' THE MARL-PIT.

TOMMY RAWHEAD?
WHO IS HE?

COURTNEY WISHED FOR SOME DAYS AFTERWARD SHE HADN'T ASKED. IT SEEMED THERE WERE SOME THINGS SHE DIDN'T NEED TO KNOW AFTER ALL.
THE GOBLIN SMILED ITS NASTY LITTLE SMILE.
AND THEN IT TOLD COURTNEY ABOUT THE WORST HOBGOBLIN THAT EVER WAS.

"WE GOBLINS BEEN AROUND A LONG TIME. SOME ARE BAD, LIKE ME. SOME ARE WORSE.

"OL' TOMMY, HE'S THE WORST OF ALL."


FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, CHARLES. YOU'RE UPSETTING THE CHILDREN.
SORRY, DEAR.

ALRIGHT, MY LITTLE BEASTIES. BEDTIME.

"'E'S THE ONE THAT *MORTALS* ALWAYS WARNED THEIR *CHILDREN* ABOUT.

"THEY'D SAY, '*DON'T* STRAY TOO NEAR THE *MARL-PIT*, OR OL' *RAWHEAD 'N' BLOODY BONES*'LL PULL YEH *IN*.'"

CAN I SLEEP IN *YOUR* ROOM TONIGHT, DADDY?

AREN'T YOU A LITTLE *OLD*-?

YES!

YES, YOU *CAN*.

"BUT *THING* 'BOUT OL' *TOMMY*, *SOMETIMES* YOU DON'T *NEED* TO GO NEAR THE *MARL-PIT* TO *FIND* 'IM. SOMETIMES 'E COMES *OUT*."

IS THERE *REALLY* SOMEONE OUT THERE?

A *BAD* PERSON?

WELL, IF THERE *WAS*, THEY'D NEVER GET *IN*.

YOUR *FATHER* HAS THE HOUSE UNDER HIS *PROTECTION*.

"AN' WHEN 'E WANTS *BLOOD*, THERE'S *NOTHIN'* CAN STOP 'IM.

"NO *SPELL*, NO *CURSE*...

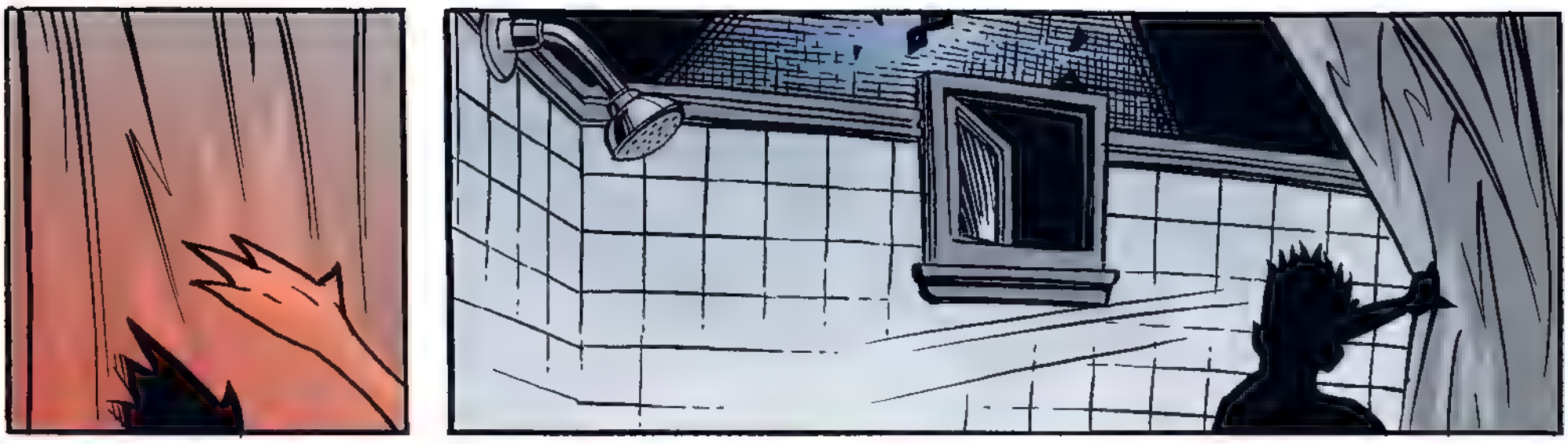
"NO MAGIC, *HOWEVER POWERFUL*, CAN *PROTECT* YEH FROM 'IM.

"AN' IF 'E *WANTS* YEH, 'E'LL *'AVE* YEH. O' *THAT* YEH CAN BE *SURE*.

"'IS *ARMS* IS SO *LONG*, 'E CAN *REACH* INTO THE *FURTHEST* HIDIN' PLACES.

"'IS *FINGERS* CAN REACH UP *DRAINPIPES*.

"BUT THE *FUNNIEST* THING 'BOUT 'IM, EVEN *THOUGH* 'E'S A GREAT *HUGE* BUGGER..."



"'E CAN FIT 'ISSELF INTO THE TEENSIEST PLACES."
PHEW!

DANIEL!
ELLEN, STOP!
"'E'S A SLOPPY EATER, TOMMY. THINK 'E LIKES 'IS MEALS T' STRUGGLE AND SCREAM."

THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO.

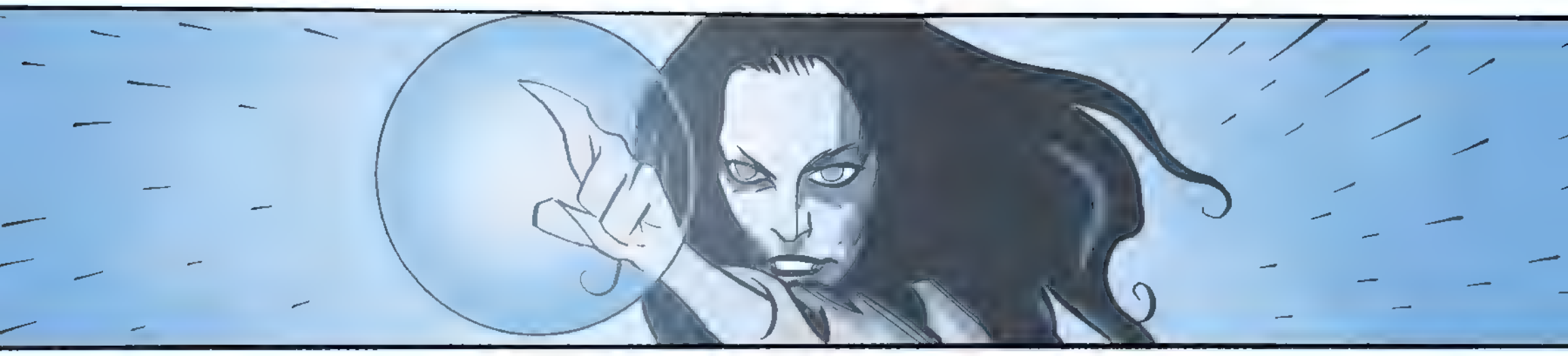
GET YOUR AMULET, CHARLES.

WE'LL SEE HOW THIS BEAST LIKES THE TASTE OF THE *FIRE AMULET.*

AAAAAAAAHHH!!!

RUN, BABY.

LET THE IMMORTAL BODIES *CURSE* YOU, UNCLEAN THING!



BOOOMMM

CURSE ME?
BUT, MY LADY, I AM ALREADY ACCURS'D ONE-HUNDRED FOLD.

"NO ONE'S EVER ESCAPED OL' RAWHEAD 'N' BLOODY BONES.
"NO ONE."
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA
"NOT ONCE 'E'D MADE 'IS MIND UP T' 'AVE 'EM."

COURTNEY WATCHED THE WATERY LIGHT OF MORNING SPILL INTO THE ROOM. SHE HADN'T CLOSED HER EYES ALL NIGHT.

HER BRAIN HAD NOW ACQUIRED A THICK LINTY COAT. BUT AS AWFUL AS SHE FELT...

...SHE COULD TELL THAT UNCLE ALOYSIUS FELT WORSE.

NO *HOMEWORK* TODAY?

THAT *WHISTLING* YOU HEAR IS THE *FALL* OF YOUR *GRADE* POINT AVERAGE.

>SNORT<

OH, *YEAH*. THAT WAS *ALL KINDS* O' FUNNY, WASN'T IT?

MS. CRISP, CAN I CHANGE SEATS?

SURE, IF ANYONE WANTS TO TRADE.

LOOK, I WASN'T FEELING TOO GOOD LAST NIGHT.

I'M NOT GOING TO GIVE YOU A ZERO THIS TIME. I IMAGINE YOU'VE BEEN WORRYING ABOUT YOUR UNCLE.

YOU'RE A WITCH, TOO, AREN'T YOU?

TAKES YOU A WHILE, BUT YOU GET THERE IN THE END.

I'M ALSO AN OLD FRIEND OF ALOYSIUS.

THEN MAYBE YOU CAN TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON. HE SURE AS HECK HASN'T.

HMM. PERHAPS IT'S FOR THE BEST.

THAT'S *CRAP!* IF SOMETHING MIGHT *HAPPEN* TO HIM, I NEED TO *KNOW* ABOUT IT.

HE'S *ALL* I'VE *GOT.*

WHY DON'T THEY JUST LEAVE HIM *ALONE?* ISN'T HE TOO *OLD* TO BE FIGHTING *MONSTERS?*

I *THOUGHT* HE HADN'T *TOLD* YOU ANYTHING.

I'VE GOT MY *SOURCES.*

I *SEE.*

IT'S NOT *FAIR!*

I THOUGHT HE WAS *RETIRED* OR SOMETHING. CAN'T SOMEONE *ELSE* DEAL WITH IT?

NO ONE *WANTS* TO.

ALOYSIUS WAS *ALWAYS* THE ONE THEY ASKED TO DO THEIR *DIRTY* WORK.

HE SAYS "*YES*" BECAUSE HE *KNOWS* IT HAS TO BE *DONE.*

JERKS.

THAT'S THE WAY PEOPLE *ARE.* DO *YOU* WANT TO GO DEAL WITH IT?

THAT'S *DIFFERENT.*

I'M A *KID.*

DO YOU THINK ANY OF *THEM* FEEL MORE QUALIFIED THAN *YOU?*

THEY *DON'T.*

COURTNEY MULLED OVER MS. CRISP'S WORDS ALL THE WAY HOME. SHE TOOK THE ROAD FOR SAFETY'S SAKE, BREAKING HER LONGTIME HABIT OF CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST.

HEY, LOOK. FRESH MEAT.

CRUMRIN.

REMEMBER?

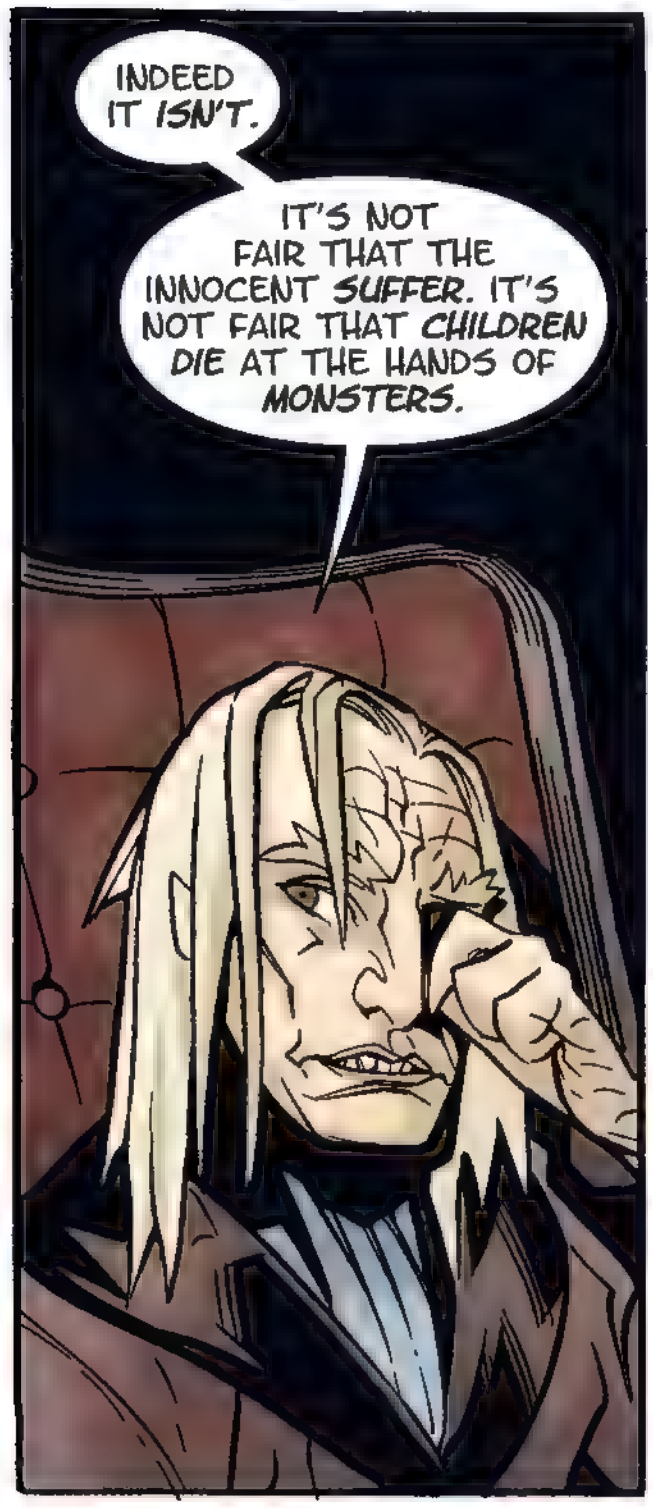
OH. OH YEAH.

UNCLE A?

>SNFF<
COURTNEY? WHAT'S WRONG?
NOTHING.

I WAS JUST... WORRIED.
I DON'T WANT YOU TO GO OUT TONIGHT.

MY DEAR, I MUST.
WHY? IT'S NOT FAIR.


INDEED IT ISN'T.
IT'S NOT FAIR THAT THE INNOCENT SUFFER. IT'S NOT FAIR THAT CHILDREN DIE AT THE HANDS OF MONSTERS.

IT'S NOT EVEN FAIR THAT OLD MEN LIKE ME ARE FORCED OUT OF THEIR COMFORTABLE SITTING ROOMS AND INTO THE COLD NIGHT. LIFE IS OFTEN ENTIRELY UNFAIR.
BUT IT BEATS THE ALTERNATIVE.

WHAT ALTERNATIVE?
EXACTLY.

I JUST HOPE WE CAN *FIND* THE BLOODY THING BEFORE IT *HURTS* ANYONE *ELSE.*

I DON'T THINK WE HAVE TO *WORRY* ABOUT THAT, WOODRUE.

WHY *NOT?*

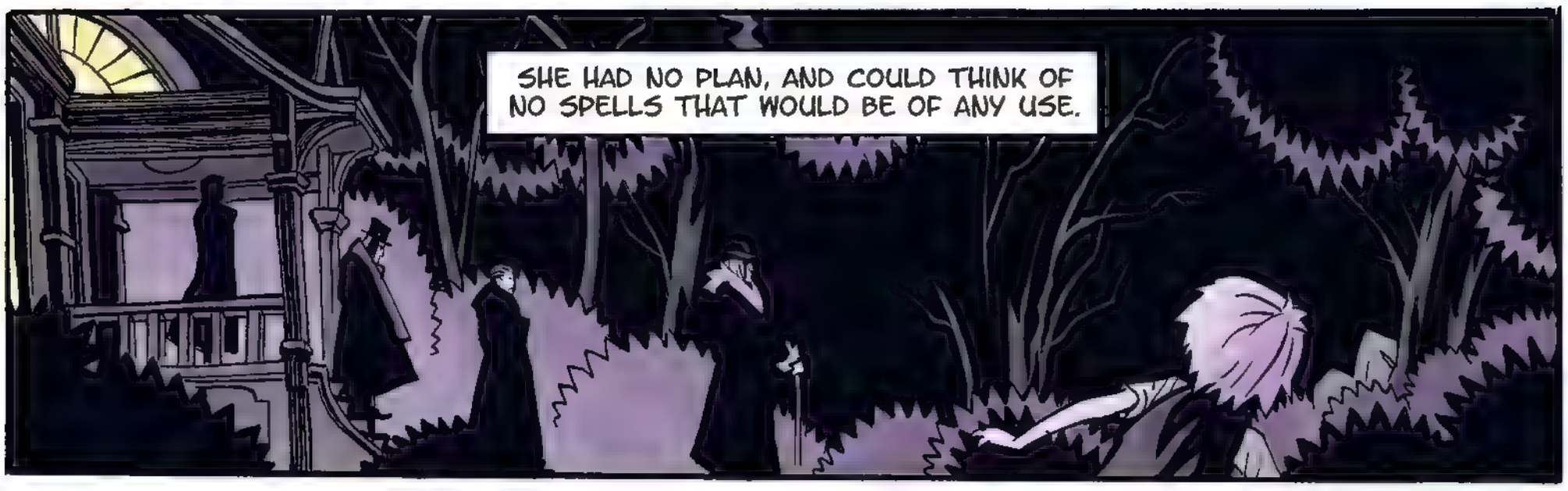
BECAUSE SOMETHING *TELLS* ME IT'S COMING *HERE.*

I'LL BE BACK *SOON.*

HMMM...

HAVE A GOOD *TIME.*

COURTNEY DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT SHE INTENDED TO DO.


SHE HAD NO PLAN, AND COULD THINK OF NO SPELLS THAT WOULD BE OF ANY USE.

BUT SHE COULDN'T SIT IN HER BED ANOTHER NIGHT KNOWING THAT HER UNCLE WAS OUT ALONE, FACING AN UNSTOPPABLE MONSTER.
PARDON, MISS.

OF COURSE, SHE HADN'T THOUGHT SHE'D BE FACING IT ALONE HERSELF.
DO YOU LIVE IN THAT HOUSE?

ME? UH...
NO. I LIVE, UH, DOWN THE STREET.
I DIDN'T JUST SEE YOU COMING OUT THE BACK DOOR OF THAT HOUSE?
THAT ONE BEHIND YOU?

OH, YEAH, THAT HOUSE. I WAS, UH, JUST VISITING.
I SEE.

YOU WOULDN'T BE LYING TO OLD TOMMY, NOW WOULD YOU?

BACK AWAY.

COURTNEY!!!

I'M THE ONE YOU WANT, CREATURE.

OH, I BEG TO DIFFER. I WANT YOU ALL.

THEN TAKE ME FIRST, IF YOU CAN.

I AM FAT ON YOUR KIND, WARLOCK, BUT ONE MORE WON'T HURT.

DO YOUR WORST.

I HAVE BEEN CURSED A THOUSAND TIMES BY SUCH AS YOU.

I AM A JUMBLE OF CURSES.

ONE MORE WILL MAKE NO DIFFERENCE.

SSSHHHHH

SSSLLLASSHHH

OH BUGGER.

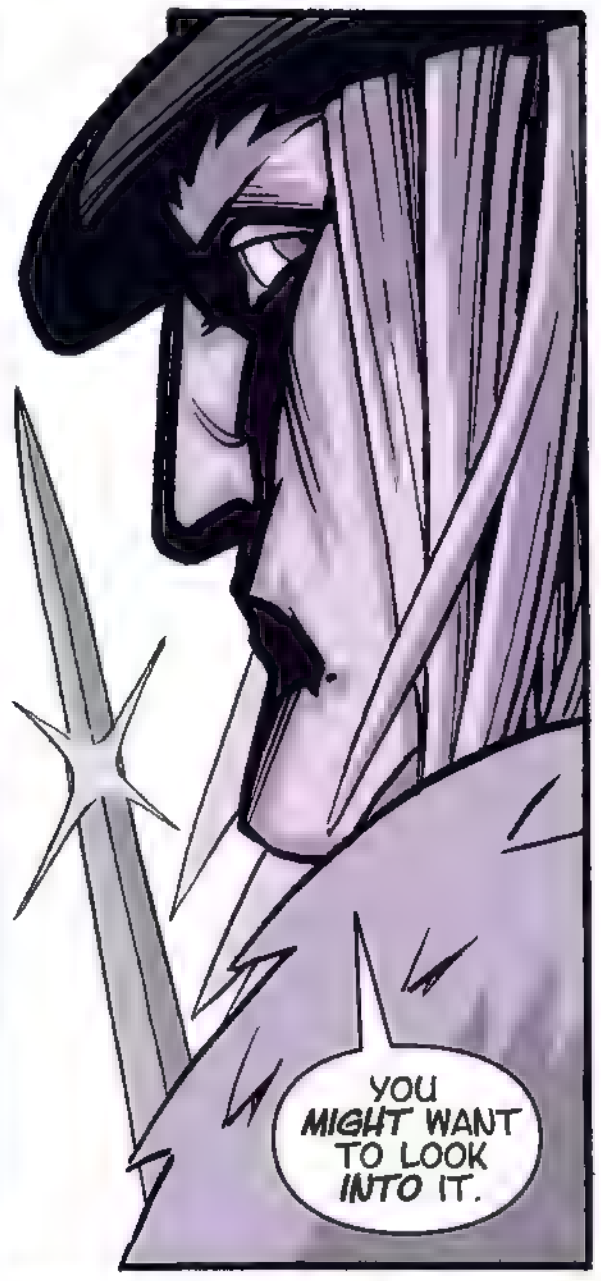
THUNK

BONK

SPUK

HECTOR.

CREATURES LIKE THIS DON'T SIMPLY APPEAR AFTER A HUNDRED YEARS OF BANISHMENT.
SOMEONE SUMMONED THIS ONE, UNDOUBTEDLY FOR A SPECIFIC PURPOSE.

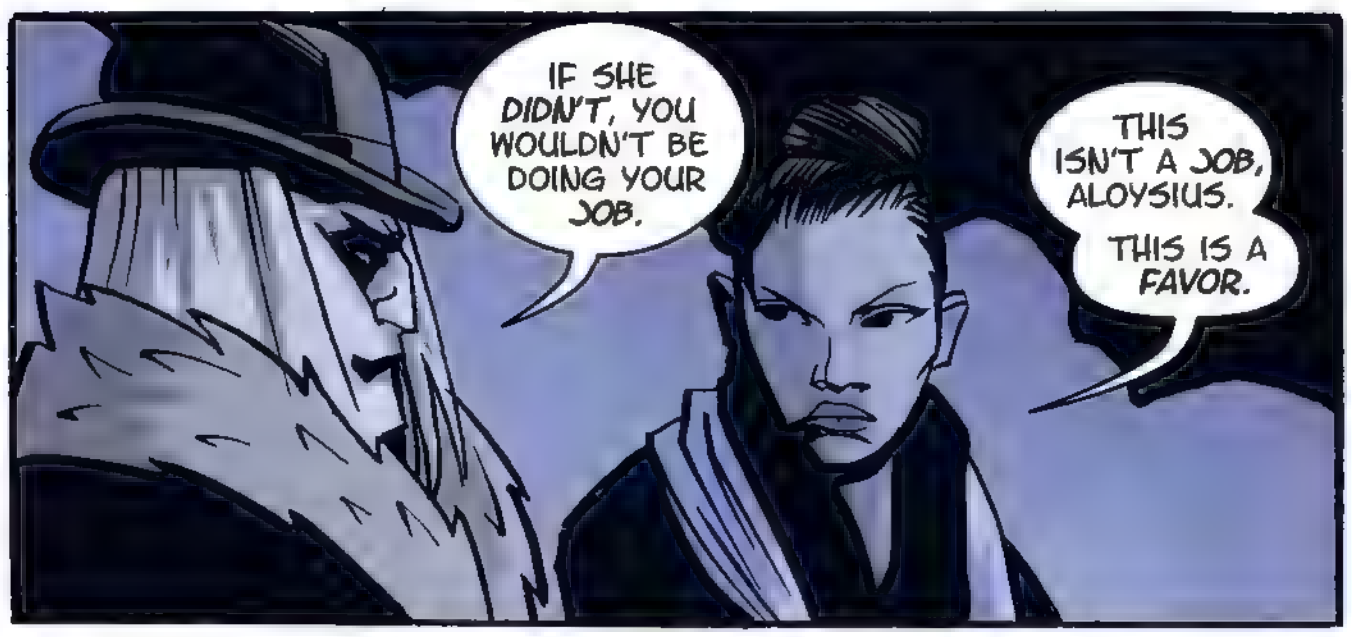

YOU MIGHT WANT TO LOOK INTO IT.

COURTNEY. IT'S A BIT CHILLY OUT.
LET'S GET INDOORS.

GENTLEMEN.
AND COURTNEY NEVER FEARED FOR UNCLE ALOYSIUS AGAIN.

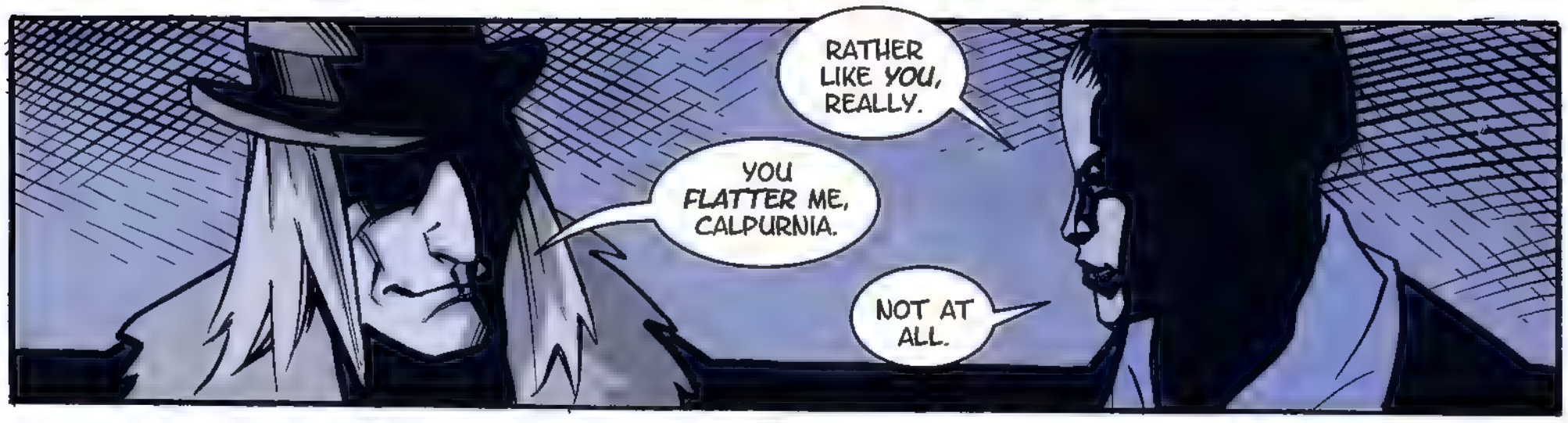
Chapter Two

HOW'S MY NIECE DOING IN SCHOOL?
STILL HATES ME.
GLAD TO HEAR IT.


IF SHE DIDN'T, YOU WOULDN'T BE DOING YOUR JOB.
THIS ISN'T A JOB, ALOYSIUS.
THIS IS A FAVOR.

OF COURSE. FORGIVE ME, MY DEAR.

GOODNESS KNOWS SHE NEEDS ALL THE HELP SHE CAN GET.
I DARESAY IF I DIDN'T STEP IN, SHE'D END UP SKULKING AROUND THAT OLD HOUSE READING MOLDY BOOKS AND FRIGHTENING THE LOCAL CHILDREN.
TOTALLY USELESS WHEN IT COMES TO ANYTHING PRACTICAL.


RATHER LIKE YOU, REALLY.
YOU FLATTER ME, CALPURNIA.
NOT AT ALL.

IT'S GETTING CHILLY.
SHALL WE GRAB A CAPPUCCINO BEFORE CALLING IT A NIGHT?

MS. CRISP WAS NOT EXAGGERATING ABOUT COURTNEY'S FEELINGS TOWARD HER. IF ANYTHING, SHE UNDERSTATED THE MATTER.

WHEN SHE REALIZED JUST HOW FAR COURTNEY HAD FALLEN BEHIND IN HER STUDIES OVER THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS, SHE BEGAN A STRICT REGIMEN TO CATCH HER STUDENT UP.

...GRUMBLE...

COURTNEY WAS BEGINNING TO LOATHE HER.

THIS ESSAY WAS *MUCH* BETTER.

I *SUSPECTED* THERE WAS AN INTELLIGENT GIRL *SOMEWHERE* UNDERNEATH THAT SCOWL.

GEE, *THANKS.*

CAN I *GO* YET?

AS *SOON* AS YOU FINISH READING THAT *CHAPTER.*

I'VE GOT TO RUN SOME *ERRANDS.* WOULD YOU *MIND* LOCKING UP *AFTER* YOURSELF?

LEAVE THE BACK DOOR *OPEN* SO *QUICK* CAN GET IN AND *OUT*.

IN SOME WAYS, SCHOOLWORK WASN'T MUCH DIFFERENT THAN THE STUDY OF WITCHCRAFT. HOWEVER, WITCHCRAFT, IN COURTNEY'S OPINION, HAD FAR SUPERIOR PRACTICAL VALUE, ESPECIALLY WHEN APPLIED TO HER CLASSMATES.

NOT THAT SHE MADE A HABIT OF IT, BUT HILLSBOROUGH COULD BE QUITE DULL ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON, AND COURTNEY HAD TO GET HER ENTERTAINMENT SOMEWHERE.

WITHER.

HMMM...

DON'T EVEN *THINK* ABOUT IT, YOUNGSTER.

QUICK WASN'T THE FIRST TALKING CAT THAT COURTNEY HAD COME ACROSS. SHE WAS BEGINNING TO SUSPECT THAT THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS FULL OF THEM. SHE WASN'T EXACTLY AN ANIMAL PERSON, AND REGARDED CATS AS TCHOTCHKES THAT WALKED ABOUT.

BUT SHE WAS AN INQUISITIVE GIRL, AS I'VE MENTIONED BEFORE, AND HER CURIOSITY WAS PIQUED.

WHAT'S THE *DEAL* *ANYWAY?*

CAN *ALL* CATS TALK, OR WAS THERE SOME *RADIATION* LEAKAGE AROUND HERE OR SOMETHING?

WHETHER A *CAT* CAN *TALK* OR NOT IS THE *CAT'S* BUSINESS.

IT'S NOT FOR *ME* TO TELL, UNLESS THE CAT IS *MYSELF.*

UH-*HUH.* WHAT I *GET* FOR ASKING A *CAT.*

YOU CATCH ON *FAST.*

QUICK!

THERE YOU ARE.

WHAT'S THE *HOLD-UP,* GIRL? WE HAVE *BUSINESS.*

AH.

HELLO, MISS CRUMRIN.

HEY, BOO. WHERE ARE *YOU GUYS* OFF TO?

NONE OF YOUR *BUSINESS.*

ACTUALLY, YOU MIGHT FIND THIS *INTERESTING.* COME WITH *US.*

SO NOW WE HOLD OUR SECRET COUNCILS TO ENTERTAIN MORTAL CHILDREN?

SOMEHOW I SUSPECT THE OTHERS WOULDN'T APPROVE.

PERHAPS NOT.

BUT I SOMETIMES THINK IT UNKIND NOT TO SHARE THE WISDOM OF THE NIGHT WITH LESSER CREATURES.

I SEE. AND YOU REALLY THINK SHE'S BRIGHT ENOUGH TO LEARN SOMETHING USEFUL?

THAT IS UP TO HER.

GEE, GUYS. I'M HONORED.

YOU SHOULD BE, MORTAL. EVEN YOUR GREAT UNCLE HAS NEVER BEEN PRIVY TO OUR GATHERINGS.

BUT BEFORE WE COME TO THE GATHERING, THERE'S SOMETHING YOU MUST DO, MISS CRUMRIN.

IS THERE?

YOU MUST EAT OF THE PLANT THAT GROWS IN THE SHADOW OF THIS TREE.

HMPH. JUST THAT? WHY?

I DO NOT ASK LIGHTLY.

I CERTAINLY HAVE NO LIKING FOR BRIAR AND BRACKEN, THE FOOD OF MY PREY.

BUT THIS YOU MUST DO, OR GO HOME.

IT WAS AN ODD REQUEST, BUT COURTNEY WAS BY NOW FILLED WITH CURIOSITY FOR WHAT LAY AHEAD.

MISS CRUMRIN, IS THAT A PLANT?

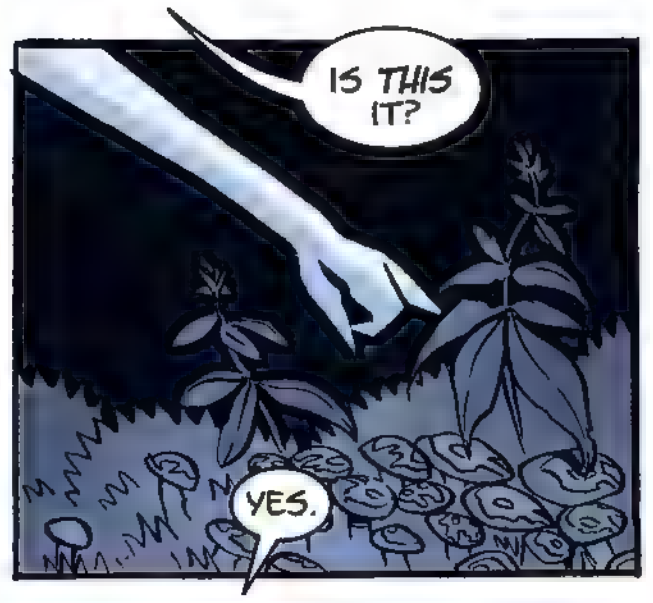
HUH?

THAT'S A FUNGUS. IT'S QUITE POTENT, BUT I DON'T THINK YOU'D BENEFIT FROM ITS PROPERTIES.

I THINK I'LL ASK MS. CALPURNIA TO ADD BOTANY TO YOUR CURRICULUM.

WHAT DOES IT DO?

IT ANIMATES THE DEAD.
BLEAGH!


IS THIS IT?
YES.

WHAT DOES IT DO?

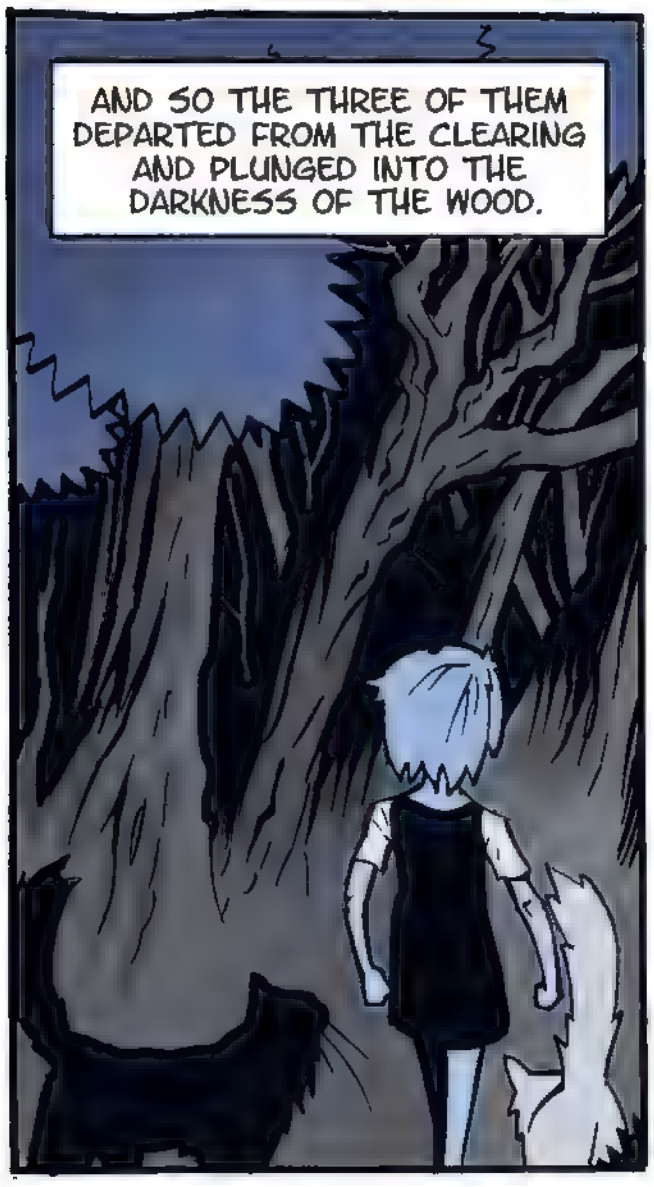
IT WILL ENABLE YOU TO WITNESS OUR SECRET COUNCIL.

IT GIVES ME NIGHT VISION?

AMONG OTHER THINGS.

OKAY, BOO. I'LL TRUST YOU THIS TIME.

COME ON, LET'S GET GOING.


AND SO THE THREE OF THEM DEPARTED FROM THE CLEARING AND PLUNGED INTO THE DARKNESS OF THE WOOD.

YEAH, I THINK I CAN SEE A BIT BETTER.

OW!
WATCH OUT FOR THOSE TREE ROOTS, YOUNGSTER.
I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU TWO-LEGGED CREATURES MANAGE.

COURTNEY HAD NEVER BEEN THIS DEEP INTO THE WOODS BEFORE.

NOT ONLY WERE THE TREES LARGER, BUT THE BUSHES AND UNDERGROWTH WERE THICKER AND GREW HIGHER THAN EVER, AS THOUGH THE WHOLE FOREST HAD GROWN TO IMMENSE PROPORTIONS.

WE'RE *HERE*.

SHE FELT SMALL AND AFRAID.

COURTNEY, STAY WITH QUICK.

WHERE ARE THE *OTHER* CATS?

I THOUGHT YOU SAID IT WAS A *MEETING* OR A *COUNCIL* OR SOMETHING.

USE YOUR *EYES.*

THEY'RE ALL *AROUND* YOU.

COURTNEY FELT THE HACKLES ON THE BACK OF HER NECK RISE. THE NIGHT WAS ALIVE WITH THE FIERCE GAZE OF HUNTERS.

THEY'RE *HUGE.*

NO, CHILD. YOU'VE *SHED* A BIT OF UNNECESSARY *WEIGHT.*

WHAT!!!

OH, YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING...

QUIET, GIRL.

DON'T *WORRY.* YOUR LARGE, LUMBERING FORM WILL *RETURN* IN THE *MORNING.*

FOR *NOW,* KEEP *SILENT.* *MORTALS* ARE *FORBIDDEN* HERE.

YOU'RE RISKING *MUCH* FOR YOUR *ENLIGHTENMENT.*

GREAT. THANKS FOR THE *WARNING.*

"THE BEST VIEW CAN ONLY BE HAD FROM THE MOST PRECARIOUS BOUGH."

OLD CAT SAYING.

MY KINDRED.

AT THE *BIRTH* OF *NIGHT,* I *GREET* YOU.

WHO'S *THAT?*

TOBERMORY, THE LEADER OF THE *PRIDES.*

IN AS MUCH AS WE *HAVE* LEADERS.

COURTNEY HAD NEVER SEEN SUCH A CAT. HE WAS HUGE AND SCARRED AS THOUGH FROM A THOUSAND BATTLES.

HE LOOKED AS IF HE COULD GIVE A FAIR FIGHT TO A TIMBERWOLF.

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN DO NOT *GLADLY* GATHER IN THIS FASHION, UNLESS SOMETHING OF GREAT *CONSEQUENCE DRAWS* THEM.

IT *HAS.*

SOME OF HIS SCARS, COURTNEY SAW, WERE FRESH, MOST NOTABLY THE ONE ACROSS HIS LEFT EYE. THE REMAINING EYE WAS STILL BRIGHT AND KEEN, AND GAZED PIERCINGLY AT THE ASSEMBLY.

I HAVE *FULFILLED* THE *DUTIES* AND *REAPED* THE *PROFITS* OF *LEADERSHIP* FOR *TWENTY WINTERS.*

LAST NIGHT, AS WAS MY *DUTY,* I FACED DOWN AND *SLEW* THE *HOUND* OF *RADLEY HALL.*

IT WAS A *COSTLY VICTORY.*

AS ONE, THE GATHERED ANIMALS LOWERED THEIR HEADS IN RESPECTFUL SADNESS.

EXCEPT ONE.

A *LEADER* MUST LEAD BY *EXAMPLE.*

HE MUST BE THE *GREATEST* HUNTER *AMONG* US.

UNTIL *YESTERDAY,* I HELD THAT DISTINCTION.

BUT A *HUNTER* NEEDS *TWO* GOOD EYES, AND I SHALL *ONLY* EVER SEE AGAIN OUT OF *ONE.*

TONIGHT, YOU MUST SELECT A *NEW LEADER.*

SUDDENLY THE LABYRINTHINE BRANCHES WERE ALIVE WITH THE WHISPERINGS OF CATS. THE SOUND CHILLED COURTNEY TO THE BONES. ONE WORD SEEMED TO ECHO THROUGH THE ASSEMBLY.

MITTENS.

MITTENS, GRAY AS MOONLIGHT, WHICH SEEMED TO PASS THROUGH HIM, LEAVING HIM ALMOST INVISIBLE, BUT FOR HIS WHITE PAWS.

IT'S GOING TO BE A *CLOSE THING.* *BOO* IS WELL REGARDED, BUT *MITTENS* IS *DEADLY.*

DEADLIER THAN *I*, THOUGH I'M *FAST* AS MY *NAME.*

PERHAPS DEADLIER THAN *BOO.*

COURTNEY TRIED AGAIN TO PICK HIM OUT OF THE DARKNESS.

PERHAPS.

CERTAINLY *QUIETER.*

WE SHALL SEE.

INDEED.

A MEMBER OF *YOUR* PRIDE, QUICK?

YES. COURTNEY IS HER NAME.

A *STRANGE* ODOR.

NOT UNPLEASANT. BUT *UNUSUAL* TO BE *SURE*. ALMOST...

SILENCE.

TOBERMORY *SPEAKS.*

THE HUNT BEGINS *TONIGHT*. *YOU*, WHO WOULD BE *LEADER*, MUST *KNOW* THAT TO RULE A *SINGLE CAT*, MUCH LESS *ALL CATS*, IS AN *IMPOSSIBLE TASK*.

THEREFORE, YOU MUST *SHOW* US THAT YOU ARE *EQUAL* TO IT BY HUNTING THE *UNCATCHABLE PREY*.

YOU *HUNT* THAT CREATURE ONCE CALLED IN THE ANCIENT WORLD "*ELLYLLDAN*," THE *ELVEN FIRE*.

IGNORANT MEN NOW CALL IT "*THE WILL O' THE WISP*."

RETURN WITH THIS PRIZE AND *TOMORROW* THE *PRIDES* WILL BE IN YOUR *CHARGE*.

THE WHA-DA-BA-*WHO*?

BOO?

QUICK?

N-*NO*, SIR. I WAS JUST SORT OF *WATCHING*.

NOT EAGER FOR THE *HUNT*, I SEE.

YOU CAME WITH *BOO*. I *SMELL* HIM ON YOU. A *FINE ANIMAL*.

I *GUESS*.

THUMP

WERE IT UP TO *ME*, I'D *NAME* HIM AS MY SUCCESSOR.

BUT *LEADERSHIP* MUST BE *EARNED*. IT'S THE *ONLY* WAY TO PRESERVE THE *RESPECT* OF OUR *KIND*.

DO YOU THINK HE'LL *WIN*?

I'VE SEEN *MANY* SKILLED HUNTERS IN MY NIGHTS UPON THIS EARTH. *BOO* IS ONE OF THE *BEST*.

HE WOULD MAKE A *GREAT* LEADER.

BUT *HE* WILL NOT WIN.

YOU THINK *MITTENS'LL* *BEAT* HIM?

MITTENS IS *DEADLY*.

I'M *SADDENED*, FOR *ALL* WILL *SUFFER* UNDER HIS RULE.

HE IS *COLD* AND *CRUEL*, *MORE* SO THAN IS GOOD *EVEN* FOR A *CAT*.

THAT *SUCKS*.

INDEED.

BUT YOU CAME HERE TO *WATCH*, YOU SAID.

YOU'D BETTER MOVE *FAST*, OR YOU'LL SEE *NOTHING*, AND YOUR JOURNEY WILL BE IN *VAIN*.

SUDDENLY COURTNEY FOUND HERSELF PLUMMETING TO THE EARTH. IN A PANIC SHE TWISTED ROUND TO SEE THE GROUND COMING UP TOWARD HER.

THUNK

HUH.

COOL.

WITH HER CAT EYES, SHE SAW THE FOREST ANEW. EACH RAY OF THE MOON ILLUMINATED THE TREES WITH A FROSTY BRILLIANCE. OF THE OTHER CATS THERE WAS NO SIGN.

YET SOMETHING PROPELLED HER FORWARD; A COMPELLING SENSE WHICH LED TO BOO.

>SNIFF >SNIFF

WHEN SHE FOUND HIM, HER NEWLY ACQUIRED INSTINCTS HELD HER SILENT. HE WAS PREPARING TO SPRING.

HIS PREY MUST HAVE BEEN CLOSE, BUT SHE COULDN'T AS YET SEE IT.

THEN, LIKE A TRICK OF THE LIGHT, MITTENS' SHAPE APPEARED AMONG THE BUSHES.

HIS BODY WAS CLEARLY TENSE AS A BOWSTRING.

HIS FOCUS WAS DIRECTED AT A SOURCE OF MYSTERIOUS LIGHT IN THE UNDERGROWTH...

...BLIND TO ALL ELSE.

RRRAAAWRRRLLL!!!

BOO!

WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU *PLAYING* AT?

A HUNTER *NEVER* FORGETS THE FOREST.

HE IS AWARE OF *EVERYTHING* AT *ONCE*, NOT JUST HIS *PREY*.

HHHSSSSSSSSSSS...

TRUE.
I SHALL NOT FORGET AGAIN.

THEN HE MELTED INTO THE NIGHT.
YOU OKAY?
YES, BUT NOW HE'LL MORE EASILY SMELL MY COMING.
SHOULDN'T YOU BE TRYING TO CATCH THE THING YOURSELF?

PERHAPS. I CERTAINLY SHOULDN'T BE SITTING HERE LICKING MY WOUNDS.
FAREWELL.
BOO SLIPPED LIKE A SHADOW INTO THE DARKNESS, LEAVING COURTNEY ALONE ONCE AGAIN.

JUST AS SHE RESOLVED TO FOLLOW, SHE HEARD STRANGE NOISES.

THE FOREST, THOUGH ALIVE WITH CATS DASHING BACK AND FORTH, NEVER VISIBLE FOR MORE THAN A SECOND, HAD BEEN SILENT UP TILL NOW.
SUCH A TERRIFIC CLAMOR SHATTERED THE SILENCE THAT SHE WAS CONVINCED A BULLDOZER WAS MOVING THROUGH THE TREES.
THEN SHE HEARD VOICES.

HUMAN VOICES.
THERE. DO YOU SEE THE TRACK?
THE BEAST CAN'T BE FAR. THE UNDERBRUSH IS STILL MOVING.

COURTNEY TRIED TO SUPPRESS HERSELF, BUT BY THEN HER NERVES WERE ON EDGE.

RAERRRRR!

WAS THAT *IT*?

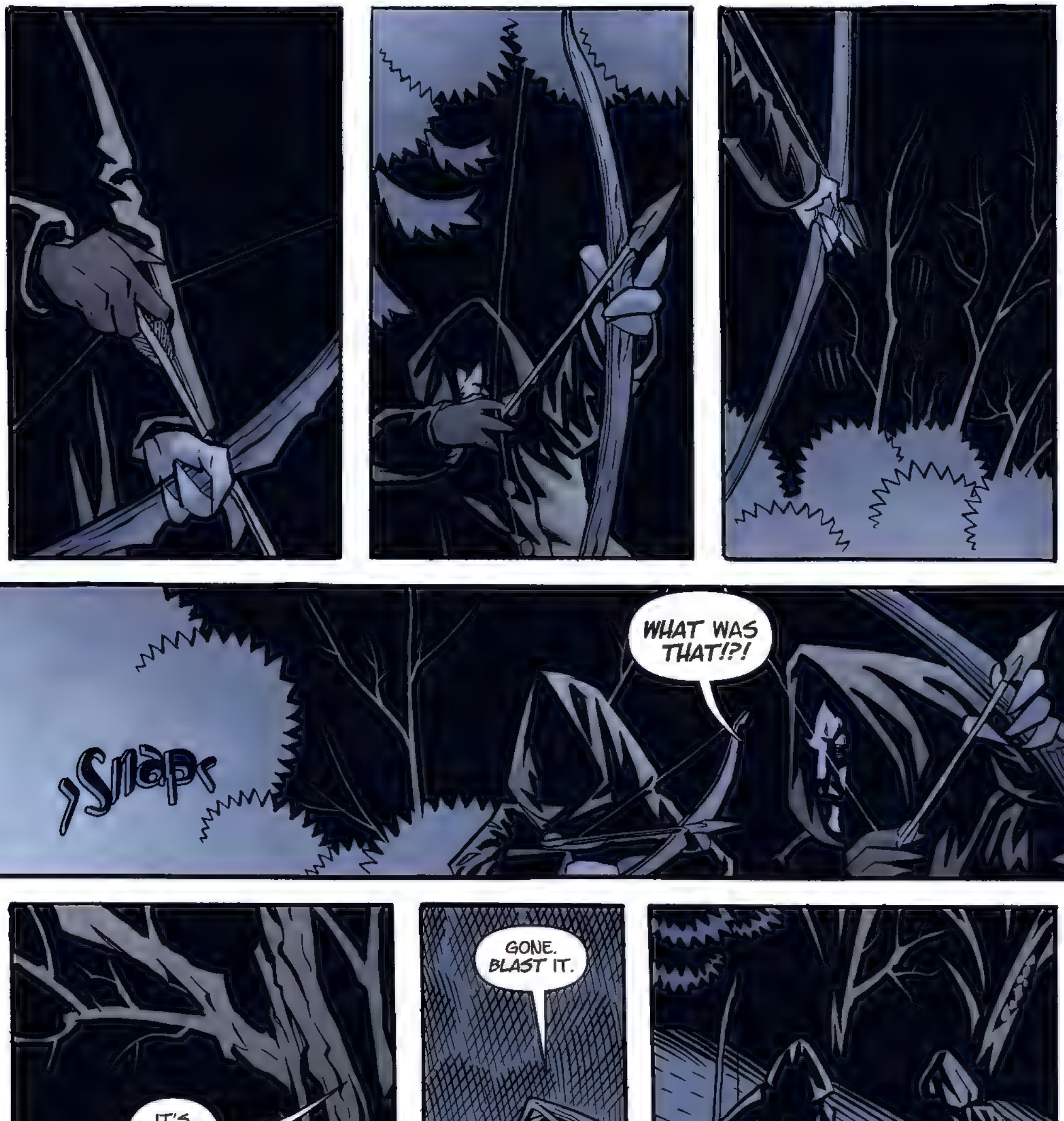
NO, BUT I'LL WAGER IT'S *NEAR*.

THERE.

THE FOREST IS *FULL* OF CATS TONIGHT, BUT *THAT'S* THE FIRST ONE I'VE *HEARD*.

SOMETHING *STARTLED* IT.

THE HUGE MEN CRASH OFF THROUGH THE BUSHES LIKE ELEPHANTS. COURTNEY KNEW THAT SHE'D LEAD THEM RIGHT TO THEIR QUARRY, AND DIDN'T FEEL GOOD ABOUT IT. HER INQUISITIVENESS UNQUENCHED, SHE RESOLVED TO FOLLOW.


WHAT WAS THAT!?!
SNAP
IT'S THAT KITTEN AGAIN.
GONE. BLAST IT.
THEY CRASHED AWAY AGAIN.

>SCRITCH<
>SCRITCH<

COURTNEY WENT RIGID AS SHE TURNED TO MEET THE GAZE OF THE CREATURE. WHAT SHE SAW IN ITS EYES GAVE HER PAUSE.

THEN IT DEFTLY PLUNGED BACK INTO THE FOREST.

COURTNEY WAS QUITE ASTOUNDED. SHE'D MET MANY CREATURES OF THE NIGHT, BEFRIENDED A FEW, BEEN CHARMED BY SOME, REPELLED BY OTHERS. SHE'D NEVER REALLY CONSIDERED BEFORE WHETHER ANY OF THEM HAD A SOUL.

LOOKING INTO THIS ONE'S EYES, SHE HAD NO DOUBT.

FILLED WITH WONDER, SHE DETERMINED TO MEET IT AGAIN.

ITS SCENT WAS SWEET AND MUSKY IN HER NOSTRILS, AND BEFORE LONG SHE FOUND IT...
...CROUCHING BY A CLEAR STREAM TO QUENCH ITS THIRST.
THEN SHE HEARD THE DREADFUL SOUND OF A HUMAN VOICE.
GOT YOU NOW, YOU FOUL THING.
COURTNEY KNEW SHE HAD LESS THAN A SECOND TO ACT. SHE TURNED AND DASHED AT THE HUNTER, LEAPING TO THE ATTACK.

HUH!?!

YOU AGAIN!

I'LL KILL YOU, YOU LITTLE–

HECTOR!

GAAAAAHHHH!

EHEM.

PROFESSOR!?!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

I MIGHT ASK YOU THE SAME QUESTION.

RATHER UNSPORTSMANLIKE CHOICE OF QUARRY, DON'T YOU THINK?

I'M SO SORRY, PROFESSOR. I WAS HUNTING-

I KNOW WHAT YOU WERE HUNTING.

I THINK YOU SHOULD GO HOME NOW.

BUT PROFESSOR...

YES, SIR.

AND YOU TOO, YOUNG LADY.

IT'S PAST YOUR BEDTIME.

WHEN COURTNEY RETURNED TO THE TREE, THE CATS HAD GATHERED AGAIN. BOO LAY IN A CORNER, LICKING MANY WOUNDS.

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

THE CLAW THAT DOES NOT SLAY ME STRENGTHENS ME.

DID YOU CATCH IT? THE WILL-O-THINGY?

NO.

MITTENS.

A GREAT HUNTER. BETTER THAN I.

HE TRACKED HIS PREY AS I NEVER COULD.

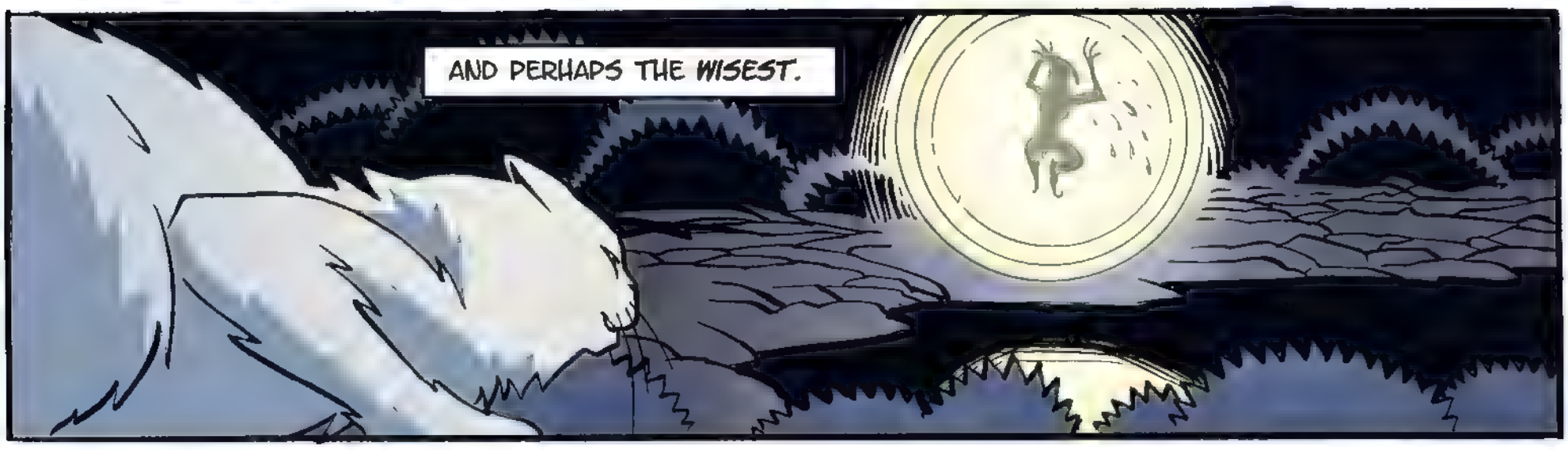
YET HE'S NOT AS WISE AS SOME AMONG US. HE FORGOT, OR NEVER LEARNED, THAT THE ELVEN FIRE LURES THOSE WHO SEEK IT TO THEIR DOOM.

MITTENS SANK INTO THE MARL-PIT.

A HUNTER MUST BE WISE IN THE WAYS OF HIS PREY.
I'LL NOT FORGET, TOBERMORY.

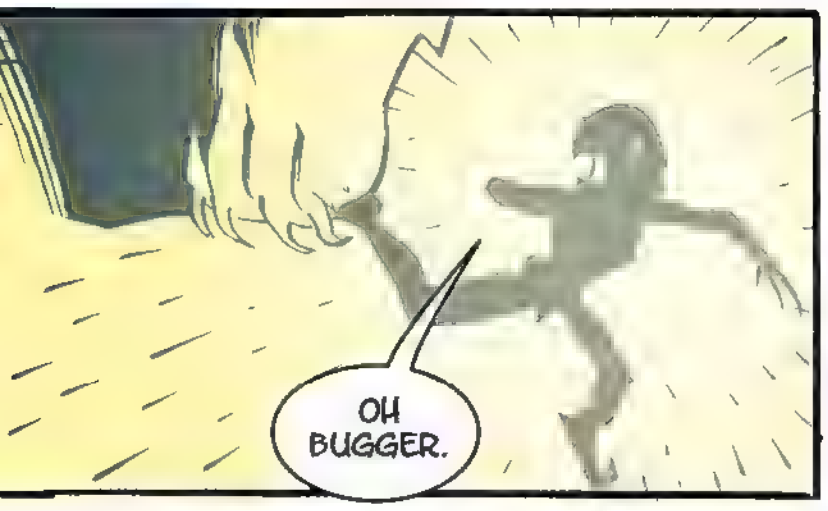
SO YOU STILL DON'T HAVE A LEADER.

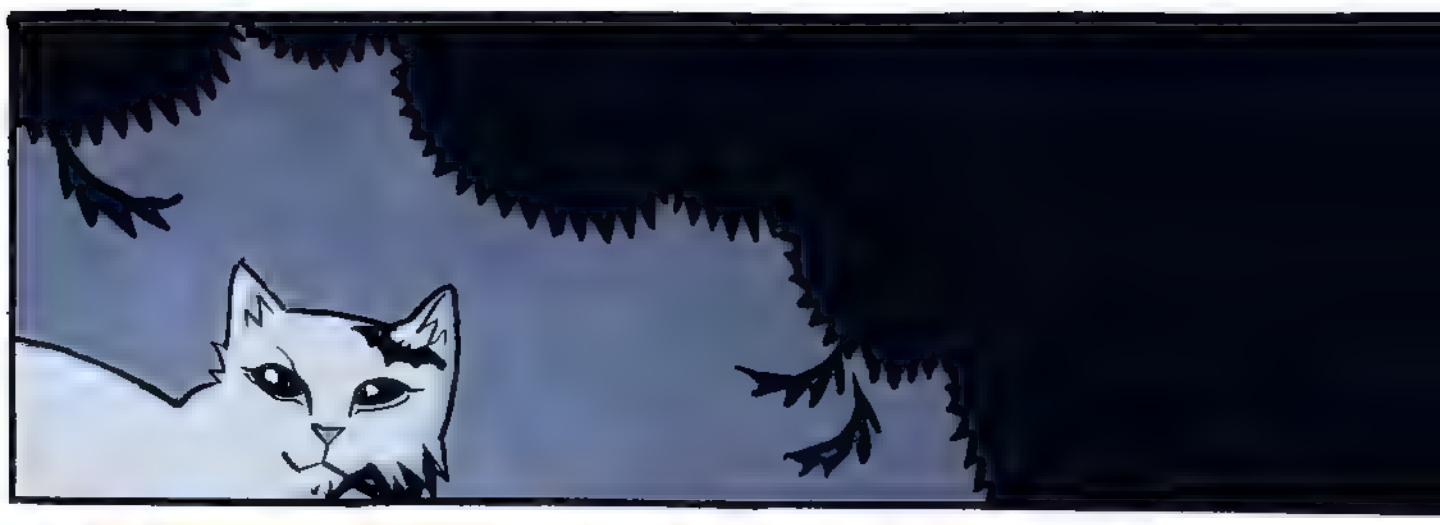
OH, WE DO. THE WORTHIEST AMONG US.
CERTAINLY THE FASTEST.

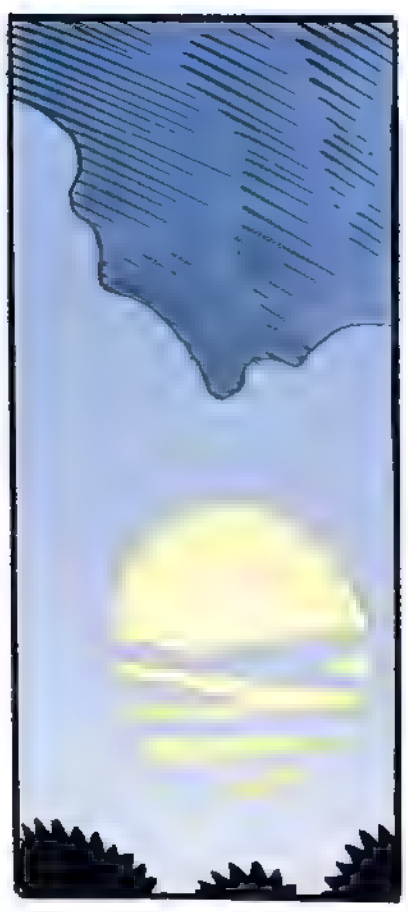

AND PERHAPS THE WISEST.

QUICK LOOKED DOWN AT COURTNEY WITH A SATISFIED EXPRESSION.

IN HER PAWS, STILL STRUGGLING, WAS A CURIOUS CREATURE, SUCH AS COURTNEY HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

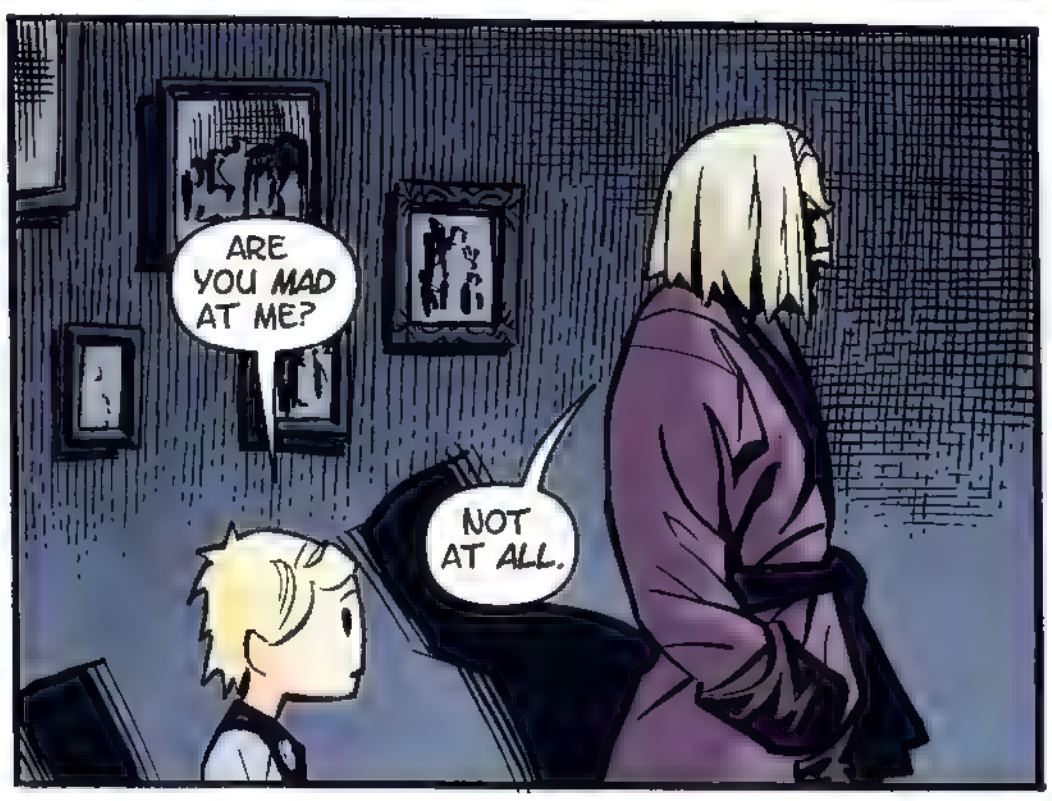

OH BUGGER.

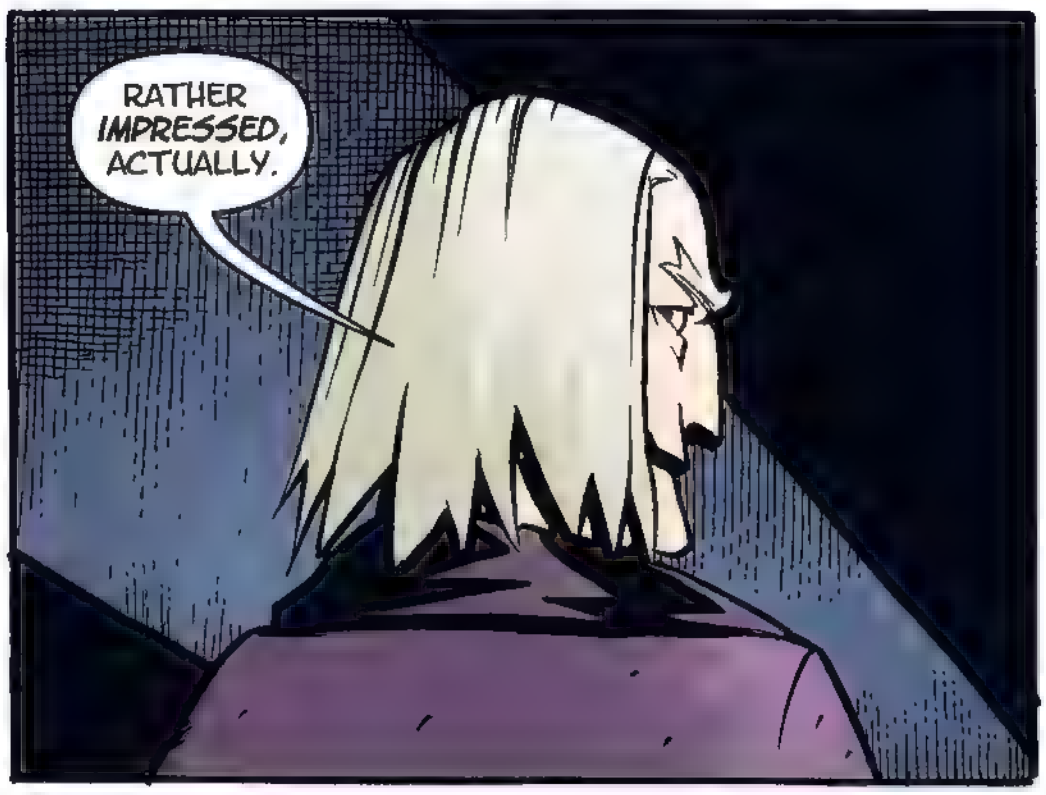




SURE GLAD IT'S SATURDAY.

"NOW I'M GONNA GET IT," SHE THOUGHT, IMAGINING THE HUNDRED DANGEROUS THINGS SHE DID THAT NIGHT.
COURTNEY. COME THIS WAY, PLEASE.


ARE YOU MAD AT ME?
NOT AT ALL.


RATHER IMPRESSED, ACTUALLY.

BUT THERE'S *SOMEONE* HERE WHO'D LIKE TO THANK YOU *PROPERLY* FOR YOUR *BRAVERY* LAST NIGHT.

WHAT ARE YOU *TALKING* ABOUT-

OH.

COURTNEY, THIS IS *SKARROW*.

HE'LL BE STAYING AS MY *GUEST* FOR A WHILE.

UH...

HI.

Chapter Three

MADAM HARKEN'S GARDEN WAS OVERGROWN EVEN BY HILLSBOROUGH STANDARDS, AND THAT'S SAYING SOMETHING.

BUT THEN, AS YOU MAY HAVE HEARD, SHE WASN'T THE SORT OF WITCH WHO STROVE TO KEEP UP APPEARANCES.

I CALLED YOU *ROUND* AS SOON AS I'D *HEARD*, PROFESSOR.

YOU KNOW HER *BEST*.

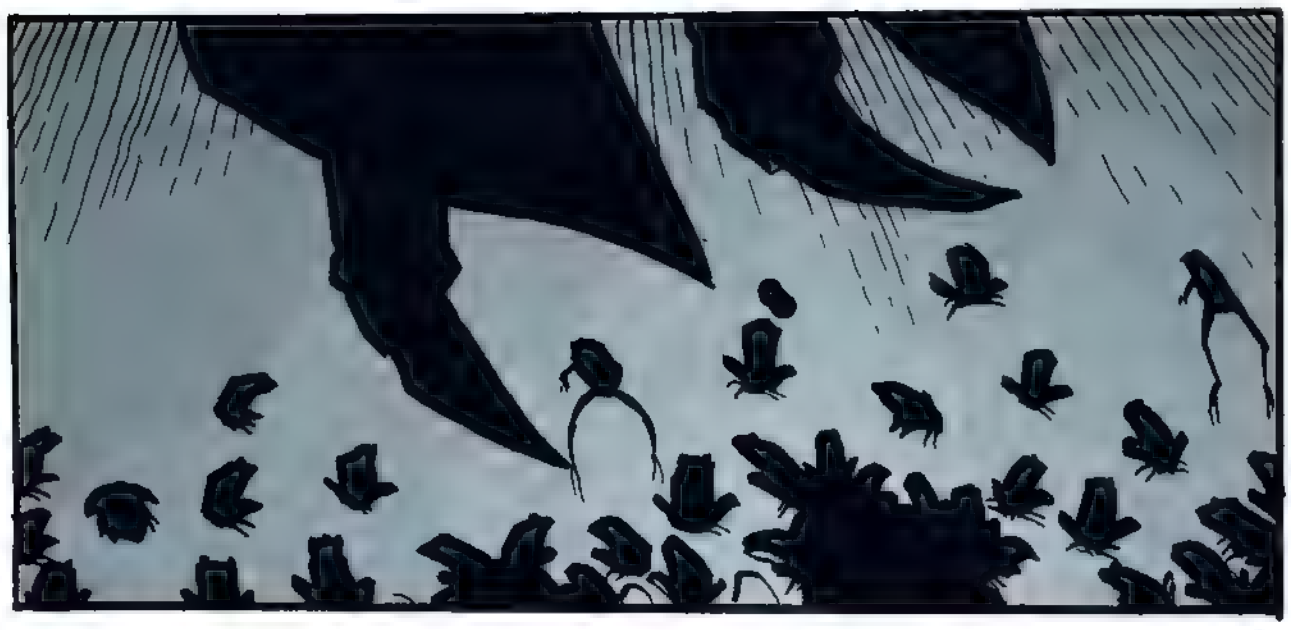
PERHAPS. YEARS AGO.

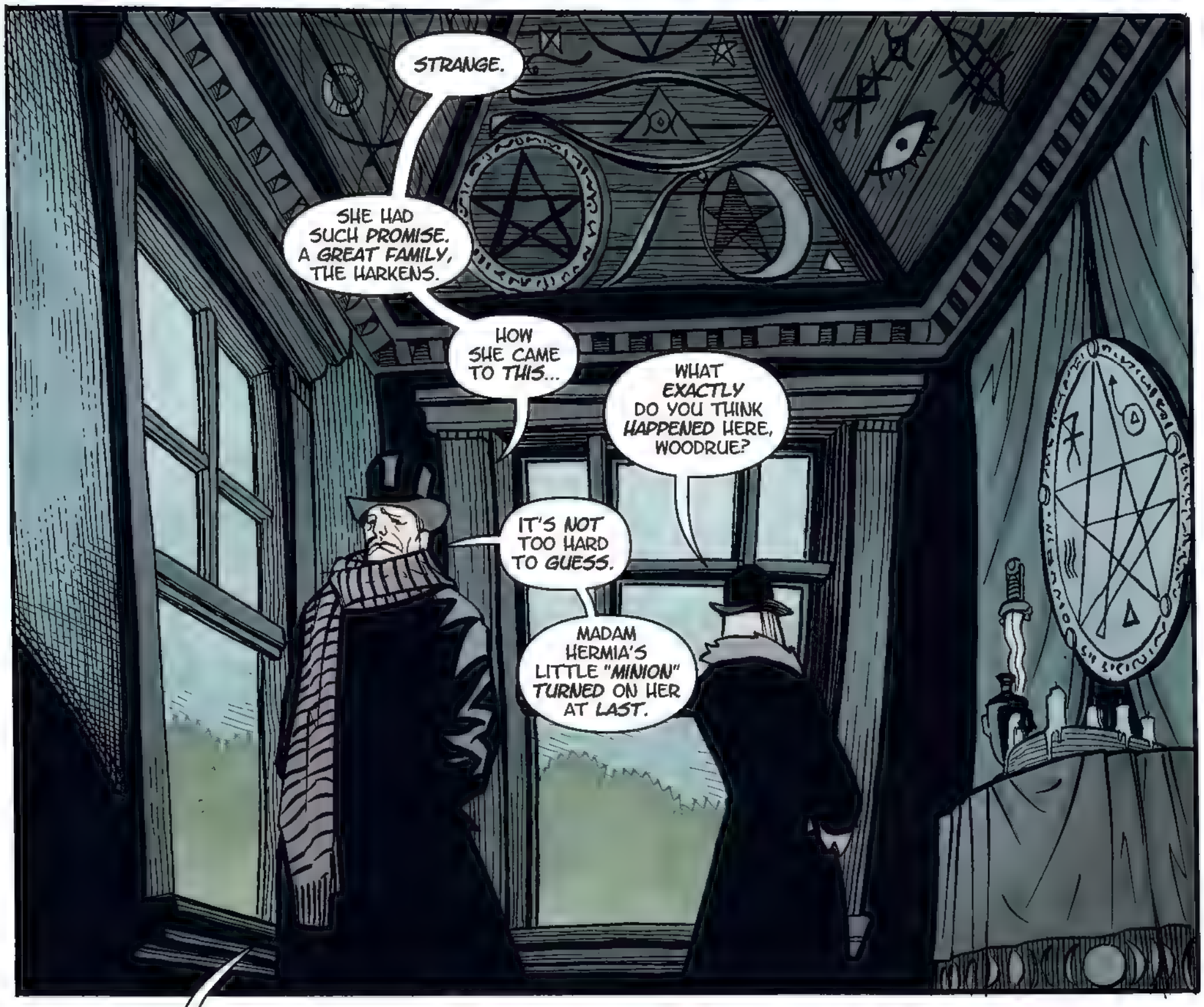
THE HOUSE WAS DARK AND DISHEVELED; BOOKS CLUTTERED THE SHELVES, KNICK-KNACKS OBSESSIVELY COLLECTED ON EVERY SURFACE.

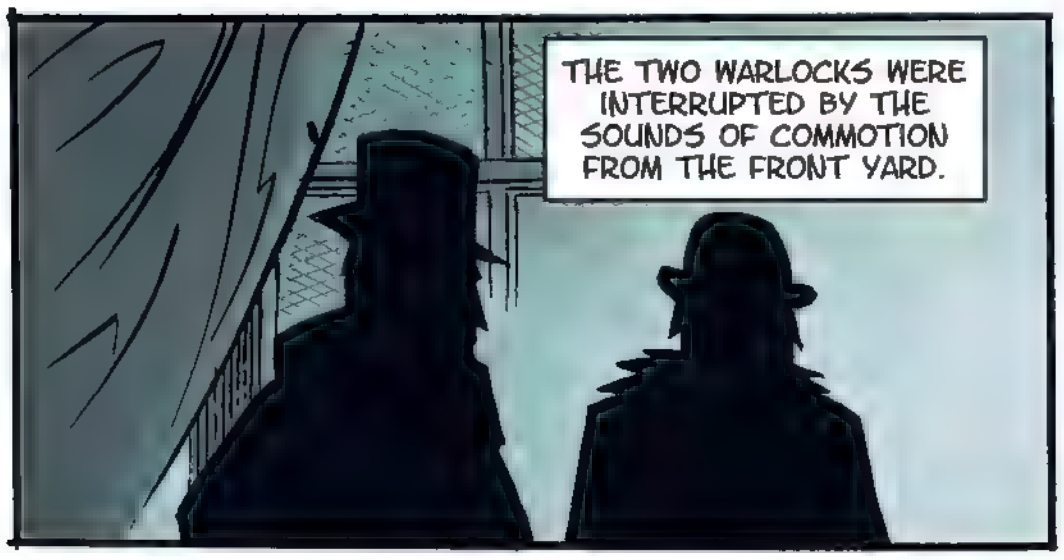
DUST COATED EVERYTHING.

MADAM HARKEN?

PROFESSOR!
COUNCILMAN!
THIS WAY.
SLAMM!
MADAM HARKEN?
HERMIA.
WHAT'S HAPPENED?
Blearg.




STRANGE.
SHE HAD SUCH PROMISE. A GREAT FAMILY, THE HARKENS.
HOW SHE CAME TO THIS...
WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU THINK HAPPENED HERE, WOODRUE?
IT'S NOT TOO HARD TO GUESS.
MADAM HERMIA'S LITTLE "MINION" TURNED ON HER AT LAST.
INEVITABLE, IF YOU ASK ME.
BUT HECTOR WILL TRACK IT DOWN.
I SERIOUSLY DOUBT THAT.
WHY?
BECAUSE I HAVE THE CREATURE UNDER MY PROTECTION.
YOU WHAT!?!


THE TWO WARLOCKS WERE INTERRUPTED BY THE SOUNDS OF COMMOTION FROM THE FRONT YARD.

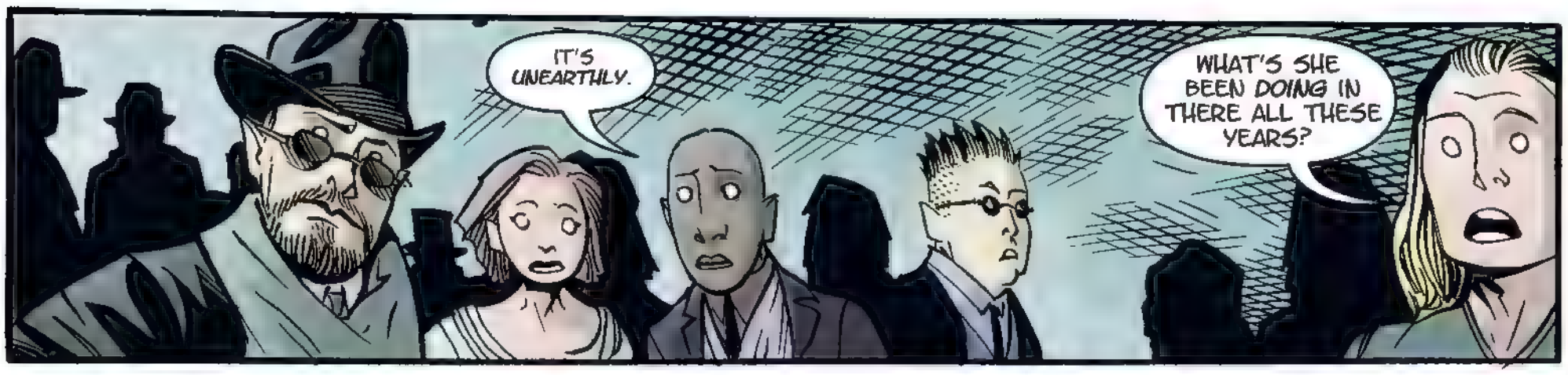
OH DEAR.
WORD'S GOTTEN OUT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, EVERYTHING IS IN HAND HERE.
PLEASE DON'T BE ALARMED.
WHERE'S MISS HARKEN!?!
WHAT'S HAPPENING?
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT!?

PLEASE, PEOPLE! LET US THROUGH.
IN TRUTH, NO WITCH OR WARLOCK HAD EVEN SEEN MADAM HARKEN IN YEARS, AND MOST HAD NEVER SEEN HER UP CLOSE.

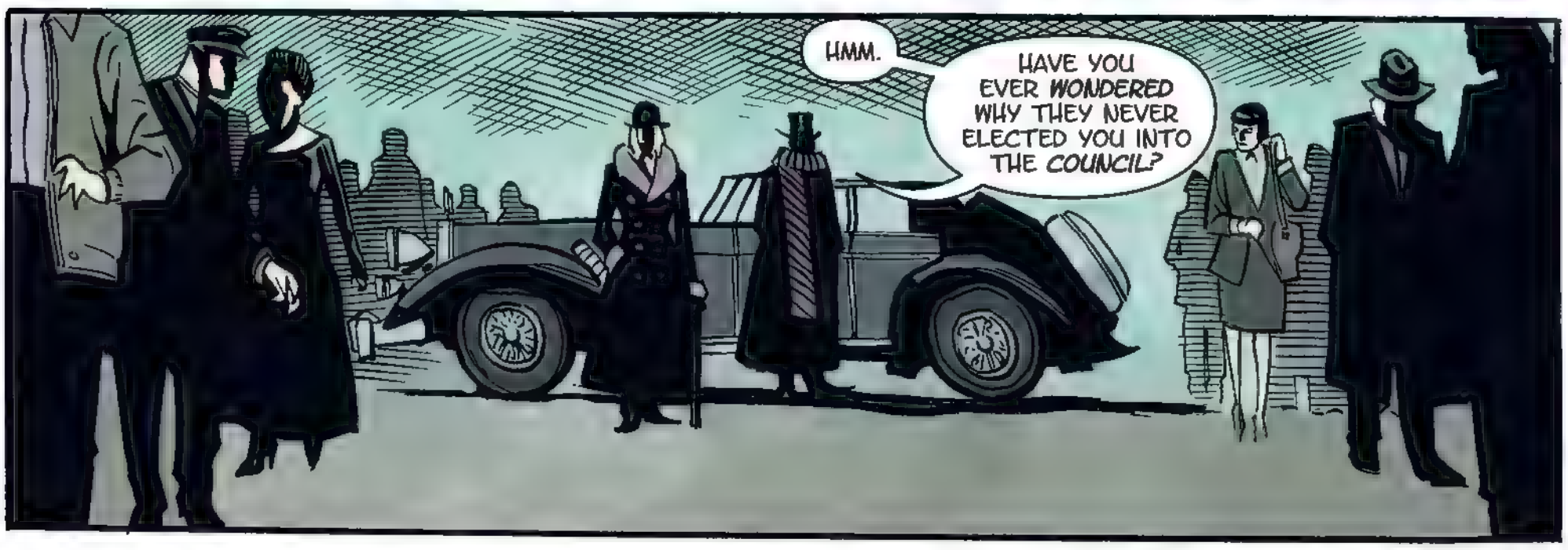
GOOD HEAVENS, LOOK AT HER.
BREATHTAKING!

HASN'T AGED A DAY.


IT'S UNEARTHLY.
WHAT'S SHE BEEN DOING IN THERE ALL THESE YEARS?

PEOPLE, BE REASONABLE. THERE'S NOTHING TO BE DONE NOW.
ALOYSIUS, HELP ME.

EVERYONE GO HOME.
NOW!


HMM.
HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY THEY NEVER ELECTED YOU INTO THE COUNCIL?

NO.
JUST AS WELL.

COURTNEY?

MMM, HUH?

OH, HEY, UNCLE A.

SORRY TO *DISTURB* YOU. I JUST WANTED TO SEE THAT YOU WERE *ALL RIGHT*.

YEAH. WE'RE *COOL*.

I ALWAYS *WONDERED* IF YOU HAD TEETH. GOOD TO *KNOW*.

HOW ABOUT SOME *BREAKFAST*?

IT'S *WEIRD*. IT'S LIKE I JUST *KNOW* WHAT HE *MEANS*.

HE DOESN'T *HAVE* TO SAY ANYTHING.

I KNOW.

WHY WERE THOSE *MEN* TRYING TO *KILL* HIM LAST NIGHT?

THEY BELIEVE HE *DID* SOMETHING...

...SOMETHING *EXTREMELY CRUEL*, TO A *WITCH*.

WHAT?

A *CURSE*.

DID HE?

WHAT DO *YOU* THINK?

NO WAY.

I DUNNO, HE'S... HE'S LIKE A BIG PUPPY.

HE'S TOO *SWEET* TO DO ANYTHING *MEAN* TO ANYBODY. YA *KNOW*?

I DO.

Krack!

WHAT WAS THAT?
STAY HERE.

NOW YOU PEOPLE STAY OUTSIDE. THIS IS COUNCIL BUSINESS.
GENTLEMEN, PLEASE-
HE THINKS HE CAN JUST DO WHAT HE LIKES!
HE'S NOT GETTING AWAY WITH IT!
WE'RE GOING TO SEE THAT MONSTER DEAD, YOU HEAR ME!

CAN I HELP YOU PEOPLE?

UH...
SEE HERE, CRUMRIN.
YOU'D BETTER DELIVER THAT BEAST OVER TO US.

HAD I?

OR THERE'LL BE TROUBLE IN THIS HOUSE, I CAN TELL YOU...

NOW, JOSEPH-

WILL THERE?

SEEMS TO *ME* YOU'RE ALL *TRESPASSING.*

HECTOR IS MY *WITNESS.* I'VE EVERY *RIGHT* TO REDUCE YOU ALL TO *SOOT-*

WHAT'S GOING *ON?*

COURTNEY! GO BACK *UPSTAIRS.* EVERYTHING'S *FINE.*

WHO *ARE* YOU GUYS?

WE'RE...

WE'RE...

WHAT THE *DEVIL* IS GOING *ON* HERE?

HECTOR, DID YOU LET THESE PEOPLE INSIDE?
I COULDN'T STOP THEM, SIR. THEY WANT AN EXPLANATION.

THAT'S RIGHT. WHO'S IN AUTHORITY HERE? THE COUNCIL, OR ALOYSIUS CRUMRIN?

ALRIGHT, FOLKS, YOU'VE MADE YOUR POINT.
GO HOME AND LET US HANDLE THIS.

THE CROWD BEGRUDGINGLY ALLOWED ITSELF TO BE USHERED OUT OF THE HOUSE. COURTNEY WATCHED THEM GO, HER OPINION OF WITCH SOCIETY DROPPING BY THE SECOND.
YOUNG LADY, THAT WAS A VERY FOOLISH THING TO DO.
STOPPED 'EM, DIDN'T IT?

I HAD MATTERS WELL IN HAND. YOU COULD HAVE BEEN SERIOUSLY HURT.

THEY MAY BE WITCHES, BUT THEY'RE STILL PEOPLE.
STUPID, SELF-ABSORBED, REACTIONARY PEOPLE.

GLAD TO SEE THAT YOU HOLD SUCH A *HIGH OPINION* OF OUR *PEERS.*

YOUR PEERS, WOODRUE.

ALOYSIUS, WE'RE *HERE* TO TAKE THIS CREATURE *PRISONER.*

ARE YOU GOING TO STAND IN THE WAY OF THE *COUNCIL?*

YOU'RE NOT THE COUNCIL, AND NEITHER IS *HECTOR.*

YOU'LL HAVE TO HOLD A *COUNCIL SESSION* AND *PROVE* YOUR CLAIM BEFORE I ALLOW YOU ANYWHERE *NEAR* HIM.

DAMN YOU AND YOUR *STIFF NECK,* CRUMRIN-

HE'S *RIGHT,* SIR.

TECHNICALLY THE CREATURE IS HIS *PROPERTY,* AND AS *LAWKEEPERS,* WE HAVE TO *PROVE* OUR *CLAIM* TO IT.

FOR GOODNESS' *SAKE,* ALOYSIUS, YOU *SAW* WHAT IT DID TO THAT *WOMAN.* SHE WAS YOUR *STUDENT.*

AREN'T YOU *OUTRAGED?* HAVE YOU NO *HEART?*

MY HEART'S WORKING *FINE,* AND SO IS MY *BRAIN.*

WHAT *POSSIBLE REASON* COULD THIS CREATURE HAVE TO *CAST* SUCH A CURSE, *CLEARLY* INTENDED TO *SILENCE* ITS VICTIM?

OBVIOUSLY SO SHE COULDN'T TELL WHAT *ELSE* HE MIGHT HAVE DONE.

AH, YES. HOW CLEVER.

THE LIKELIEST SUSPECT OF THE CRIME COMMITTED IT PRECISELY IN ORDER TO SHIELD HIMSELF FROM BLAME.

NOW, ALOYSIUS, ARE YOU QUESTIONING OUR MARSHAL'S DETECTIVE WORK?

I MIGHT, WERE HE TO DO ANY.

I'LL SEE YOU TWO AT THE COUNCIL SESSION.

THAT IS, IF YOU CAN ASSEMBLE ENOUGH NONSENSE TO HOLD ONE.

PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO GET OUT.

COURTNEY?

YEAH?

k-klak

I FORBID YOU TO INVOLVE YOURSELF IN THIS MATTER.

I MEAN IT.

YES, SIR.

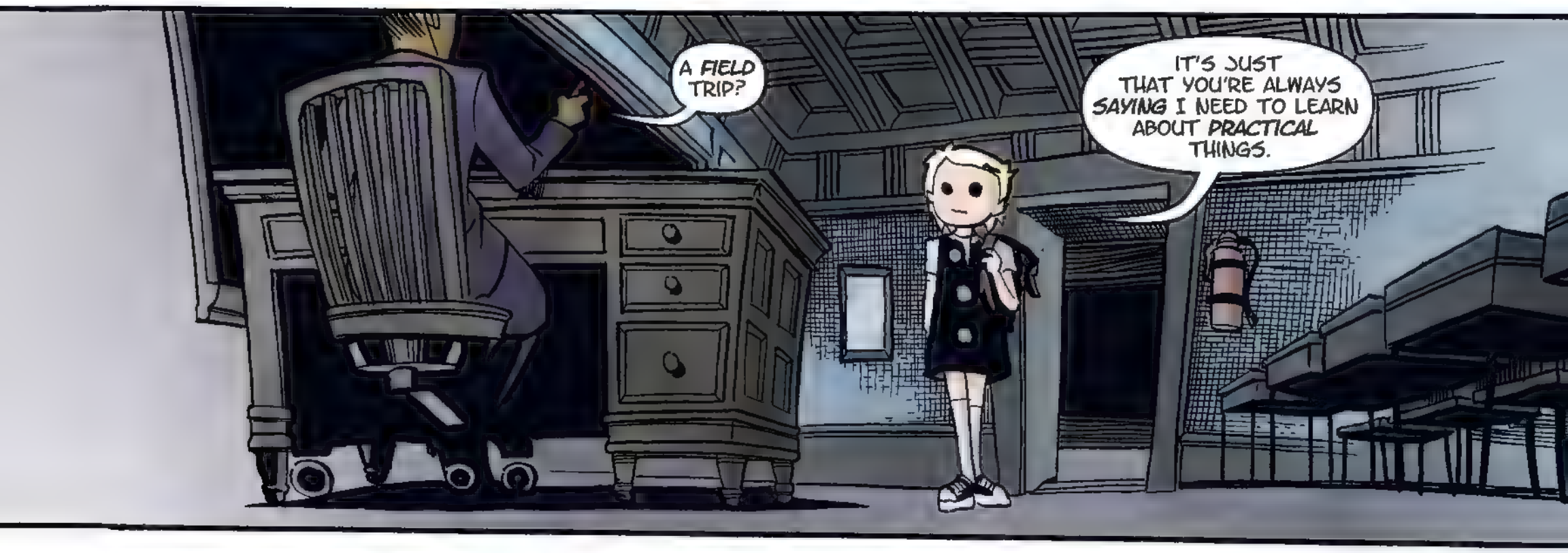
WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT SKARROW?
THEY SAY 'E WERE ONCE A MORTAL CHILD TAKEN BY THE KINDLY ONES YEARS AGO.
TILL YESTERDAY, HE LIVED WITH OL' MADAM HARKEN, YONDER.
HARKEN. WHAT'S HER DEAL?

YOU SHOULD KNOW, MISSY. YOUR UNCLE TAUGHT HER.
ALWAYS ONE FOR STUDYIN' US NIGHT THINGS, MISS HARKEN.
CAUGHT ME IN THE WOODS COUPLE O' TIMES, WHEN SHE WERE A LASS. BUT SHE WERE MUCH NICER 'N YOU.

THINK I'D BETTER HAVE A LOOK AT HER.

GONNA BE HARD TE DO THAT. THEM WARLOCKS 'AVE 'ER UP AT RADLEY HALL.
NOBODY GETS IN THERE UNLESS THEY LET 'EM.

THAT SO?


A FIELD TRIP?
IT'S JUST THAT YOU'RE ALWAYS SAYING I NEED TO LEARN ABOUT PRACTICAL THINGS.

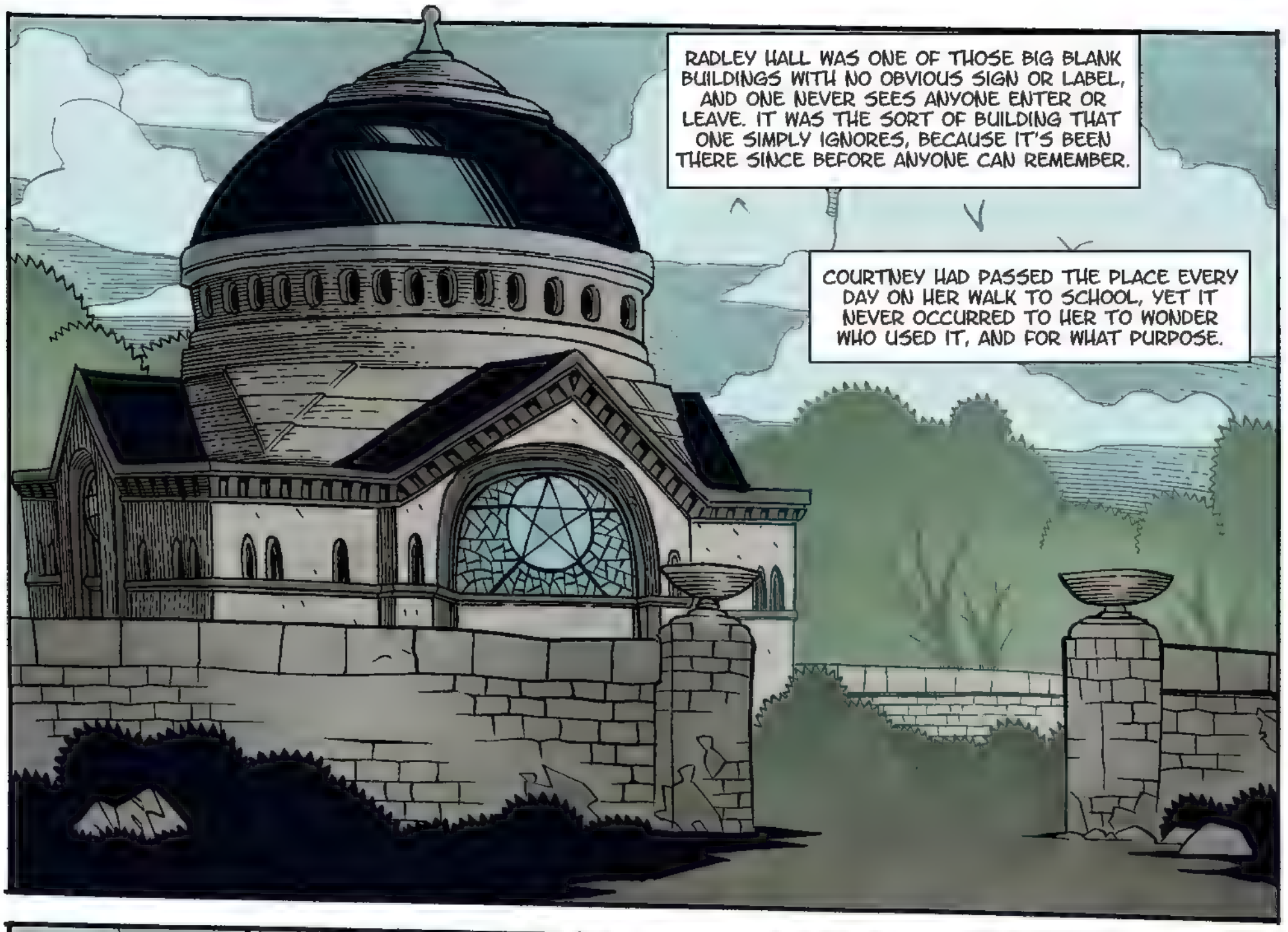
IF I'M GOING TO BE PART OF THIS, YA KNOW, COVEN, OR WHATEVER, I SHOULD KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT IT.
THAT'S PRACTICAL, ISN'T IT?

EXTREMELY SO.
TELL YOU WHAT. YOU KNOW THAT CREATIVE WRITING PROJECT YOU WERE PLANNING ON NOT DOING?

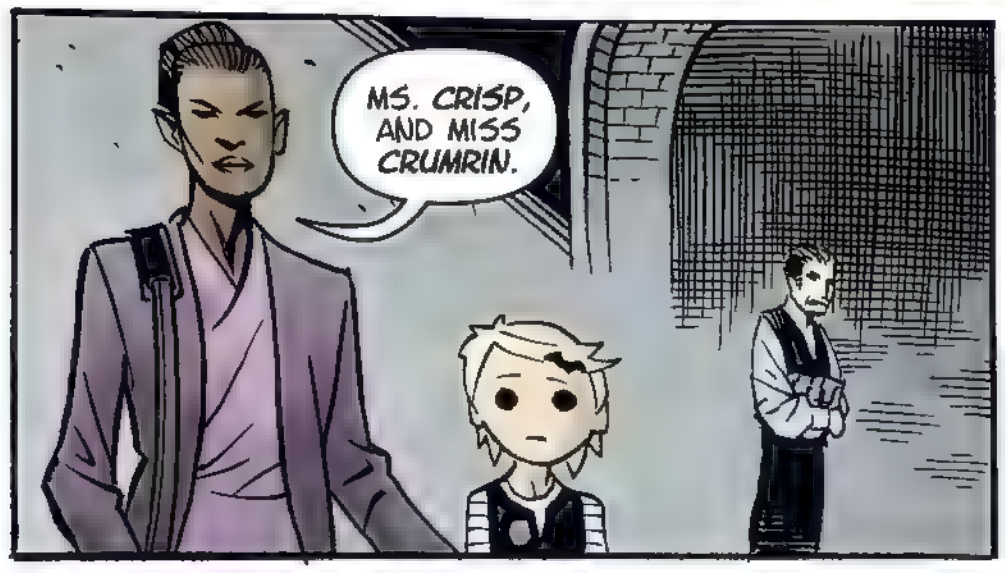
I WAS GOING TO-
UH HUH.
OKAY, I'LL DO IT.

AND READ IT IN FRONT OF CLASS, JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.

YES, MS. CRISP.


RADLEY HALL WAS ONE OF THOSE BIG BLANK BUILDINGS WITH NO OBVIOUS SIGN OR LABEL, AND ONE NEVER SEES ANYONE ENTER OR LEAVE. IT WAS THE SORT OF BUILDING THAT ONE SIMPLY IGNORES, BECAUSE IT'S BEEN THERE SINCE BEFORE ANYONE CAN REMEMBER.
COURTNEY HAD PASSED THE PLACE EVERY DAY ON HER WALK TO SCHOOL, YET IT NEVER OCCURRED TO HER TO WONDER WHO USED IT, AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE.

JUST TAKING MY STUDENT ON A TOUR. WE WON'T DISTURB ANYONE. SHE WANTS TO SEE THE HALL OF WONDERS.
NAMES?


MS. CRISP, AND MISS CRUMRIN.

WHAT'S THE HALL OF WONDERS?
YOU'LL SEE.
CALPURNIA?

HECTOR. IT'S BEEN A *WHILE.*

YES *INDEED.* WHAT BRINGS *YOU* TO THIS *FUSTY* OLD *RUIN?*

MY *STUDENT.* COURTNEY, *THIS* IS-

BUT OF *COURSE* I KNOW MISS CRUMRIN.

I SEE YOUR *UNCLE* ISN'T THE *ONLY* WICKED INFLUENCE ON YOU.

JUST TRYING TO KEEP HER *FEET* ON THE *GROUND.*

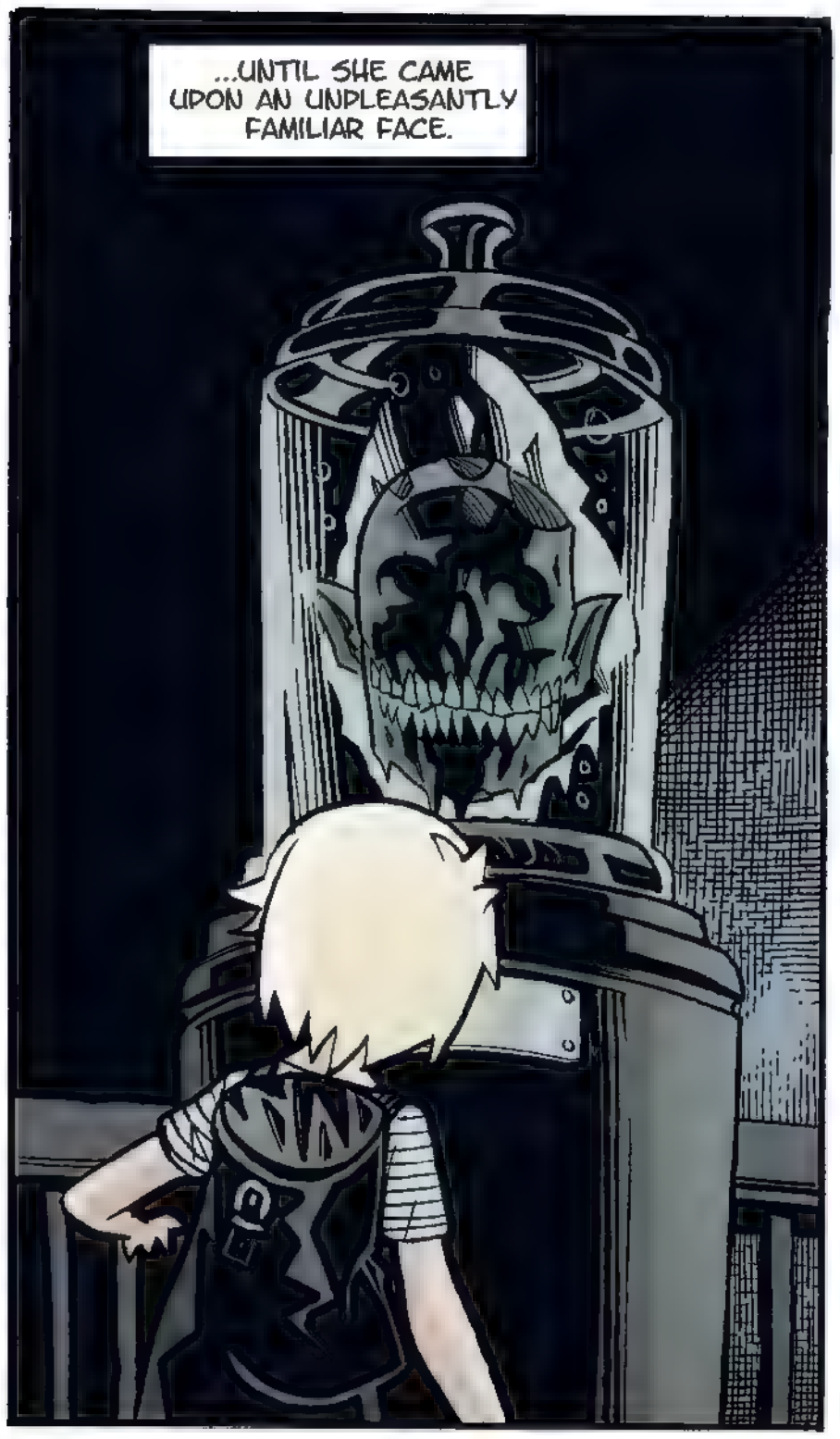
TO BE *SURE.* QUITE A CHALLENGE WITH THE PROFESSOR AROUND, I DARE SAY.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE *SUBJECT,* THERE'S *SOMETHING* I'D LIKE TO *TALK* TO YOU ABOUT.

WOULD YOU *EXCUSE* US, MISS CRUMRIN?

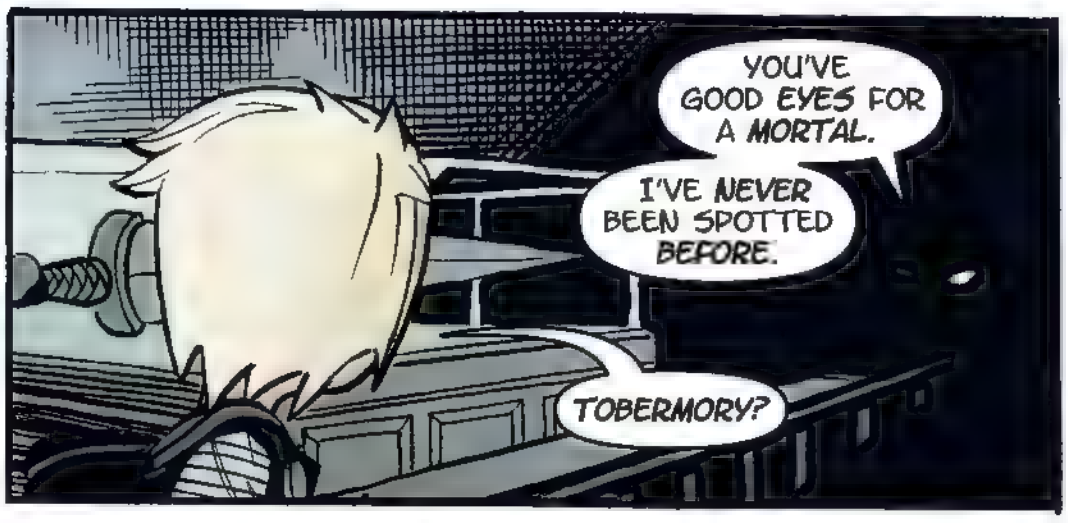
THE HALL OF WONDERS FAR EXCEEDED ITS TITLE. COURTNEY HAD SEEN MANY AMAZING THINGS, BUT NOTHING SO MARVELOUS AS THE ARTIFACTS DISPLAYED HEREIN.

SHE WANDERED WIDE-EYED THROUGH THE EXHIBITS...


...UNTIL SHE CAME UPON AN UNPLEASANTLY FAMILIAR FACE.

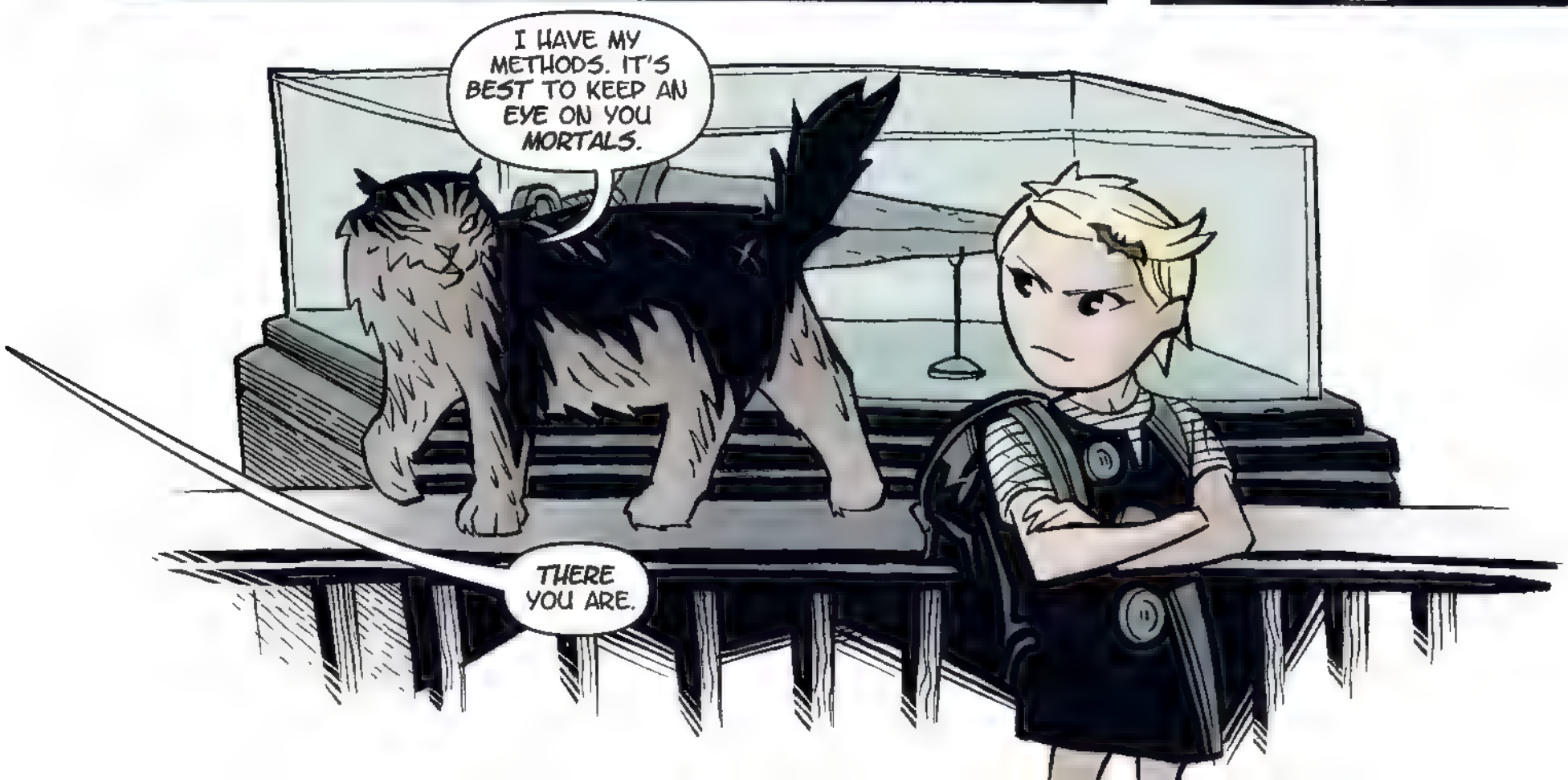
RAWHEAD AND BLOODY BONES
~ DESTROYED BY THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS ~
YEAH RIGHT. DESTROYED BY COMMITTEE.

SUDDENLY, THOUGH SHE COULDN'T SAY WHY, COURTNEY KNEW SHE WAS BEING WATCHED.


YOU'VE GOOD EYES FOR A MORTAL.
I'VE NEVER BEEN SPOTTED BEFORE.
TOBERMORY?

I THOUGHT YOU SMELT FAMILIAR, THOUGH YOU'VE PUT ON SOME WEIGHT SINCE WE LAST MET.

AND LOST A BIT OF FUR. HOW DID YOU GET IN?


I HAVE MY METHODS. IT'S BEST TO KEEP AN EYE ON YOU MORTALS.
THERE YOU ARE.

PRETTY AWFUL, HUH?

THOUGH I GATHER THIS ISN'T YOUR FIRST CLOSE LOOK.

HMMM. WHAT'D THE COP WANT?

HECTOR? OH, NOTHING IMPORTANT.

WAS IT ABOUT MY UNCLE?

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THAT?

I GOT MY SOURCES.

SO I'VE GATHERED.

YES, HE WANTED ME TO TALK WITH ALOYSIUS. AND I WILL.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO SAY?

JUST TO BE CAREFUL HOW HE HANDLES THE COUNCIL.

YOUR UNCLE HAS ALIENATED A LOT OF PEOPLE OVER THE YEARS.

THAT'S NOT ALWAYS SUCH A WISE WAY TO LIVE.

HE SEEMS TO DO OKAY. NOBODY MESSES WITH HIM.

ISOLATION ISN'T EVERYTHING.

IT'S NOT WISE TO TURN YOUR BACK ON THE WORLD.

COURTNEY DIDN'T CARE FOR MS. CRISP AT ALL, BUT SHE KNEW THAT HER TEACHER WAS NO FOOL. SHE WEIGHED THOSE LAST WORDS THOUGHTFULLY AS SHE WALKED HOME.

I DON'T *HAVE* ANY MORE MONEY.

BETTER GET YOUR *PARENTS* TO UP YOUR *ALLOWANCE*. YOU'RE GOING TO *NEED* IT.

"THE WORLD CAN BE A PRETTY SUCKY PLACE," THOUGHT COURTNEY. "SMALL WONDER UNCLE ALOYSIUS DOESN'T GET TOO INVOLVED IN IT."

WORKING ON THE CASE?

BRUSHING UP ON THE ARCHAIC LAWS REGARDING SKARROW'S KIND.

WHY NOT?

WARLOCKS HAVE NEVER TRUSTED THE NIGHT THINGS.

WITCHCRAFT CAME INTO BEING PARTIALLY TO COUNTER THE CREATURES OF THE UNDERWORLD.

IN OLDEN TIMES THEY WERE BLAMED FOR EVERYTHING FROM ECLIPSES TO TOOTHACHES.

I'M AFRAID THE PREJUDICE HAS STUCK THROUGHOUT THE AGES, DESPITE CENTURIES OF RESEARCH. PEOPLE LIKE WOODRUE WOULD STILL USE THEM AS SCAPEGOATS FOR ALL THE WORLD'S SORROWS.

BUT YOU WON'T LET THEM HURT HIM, WILL YOU?

I'LL CERTAINLY DO MY BEST, MY DEAR.

I'VE BEEN THINKING. SKARROW DIDN'T CAST THAT CURSE, RIGHT?

SO WHO DID?

GOOD QUESTION.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE ONLY PERSON WHO MIGHT KNOW CANNOT TELL US.

"WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT," THOUGHT COURTNEY.

MISSY? THAT YOU?

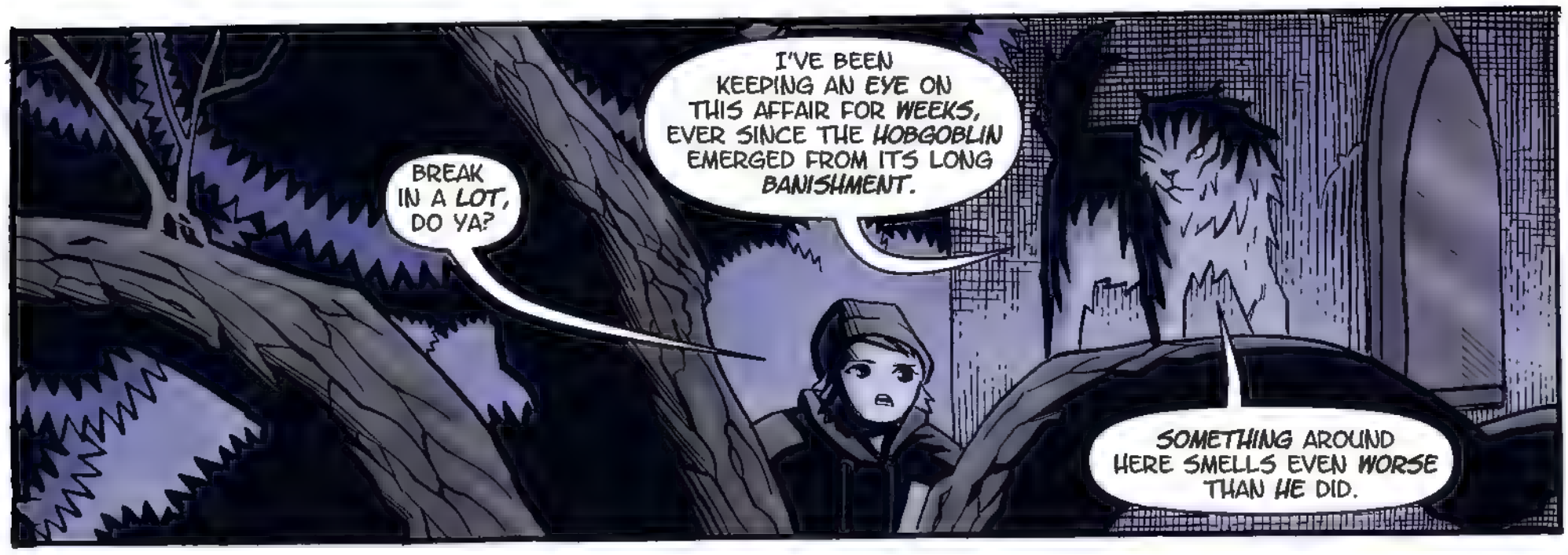
YEAH. WHO'S THE RUNT?

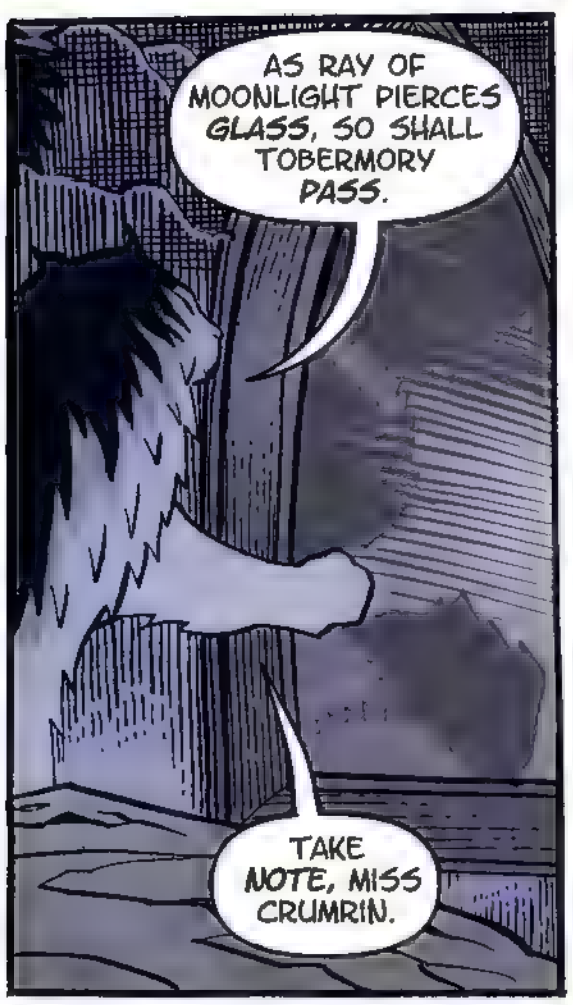
ME LITTLE BROTHER, BUTTERBUG.
RUH!

WHAT'D YOU BRING HIM FOR? COULDN'T FIND A BABYSITTER?
TOUGH JOB, RADLEY HALL... THOUGHT YE COULD USE THE HELP.
SHOULDN'T BE TOO HARD. I HAVE AN INSIDE MAN.

THIS WAY.

ISN'T THERE A HUGE, SLAVERING MASTIFF THAT PROTECTS THE GROUNDS ?
THERE USED TO BE.


BREAK IN A LOT, DO YA?
I'VE BEEN KEEPING AN EYE ON THIS AFFAIR FOR WEEKS, EVER SINCE THE HOBGOBLIN EMERGED FROM ITS LONG BANISHMENT.
SOMETHING AROUND HERE SMELLS EVEN WORSE THAN HE DID.


AS RAY OF MOONLIGHT PIERCES GLASS, SO SHALL TOBERMORY PASS.
TAKE NOTE, MISS CRUMRIN.

IT'S MUCH SIMPLER TO TRICK A SPELL THAN TO BREAK IT.
WARLOCKS ALWAYS DO IT THE HARD WAY.

THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU. I'VE BUSINESS OF MY OWN.
COOL.
THANKS FOR THE HELP.

THIS MUST BE HECTOR'S OFFICE.
LOOKS LIKE AN INCIDENT REPORT FOR LAST NIGHT.
'R SOMETHING.
HMMM...

MADAM HARKEN MUST BE THROUGH THERE.

HERE, TAKE THIS PEN.

CAN YOU WRITE?

DO YOU SEE THAT, SIR?

DIABOLICAL.

NO, NOT HER. THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE I NEED TO TALK TO. DOWNSTAIRS.

THERE.

FER GOODNESS' SAKE, MISS. YE'VE GOT TE BE JOKIN'!

WHY 'IM?

CALL IT A *HUNCH*. JUST *HELP* ME.

YER A CRUMRIN ALRIGHT. NERVES OF IRON.

GRUH!

CAN'T HE *TALK*?

NEVER COULD TEACH 'IM MORTAL SPEECH. 'IS TONGUE'S TOO BIG.

WELL, YOU BETTER SHUT HIM UP OR WE'RE ALL IN FOR IT.

GRAH!

GRAH!

WOULD YOU SHUT-

-OH BUGGER.

WOOOSSSSHHHH

I THORT THE EXIT WOULD BE BEST, LASS.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING!?!

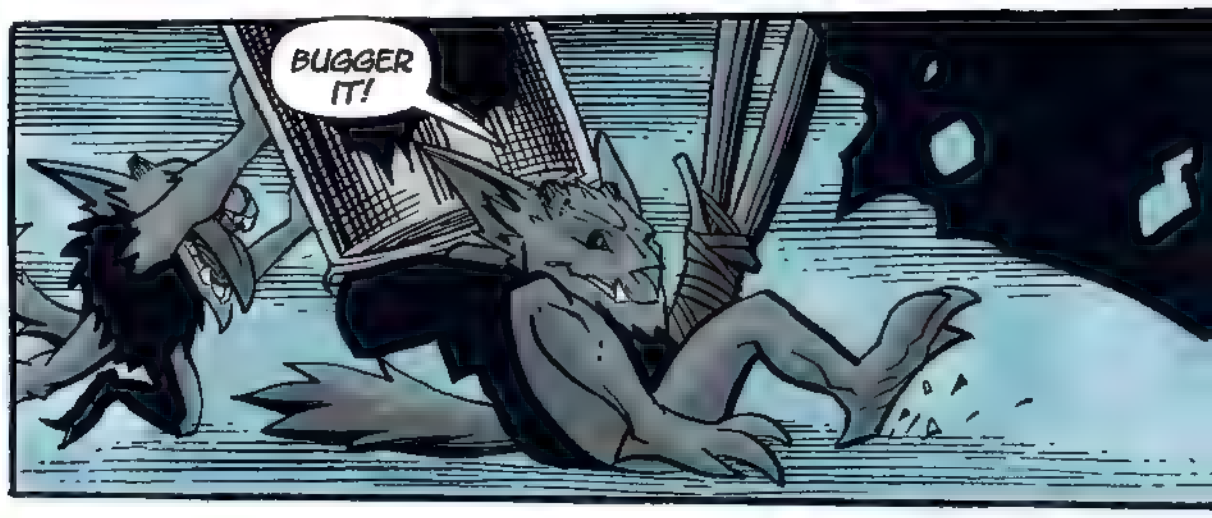
BUT YOU'LL TRIP THE ALARMS!

I THINK THEY'RE TRIPPED, MISS SMARTY-PANTS!

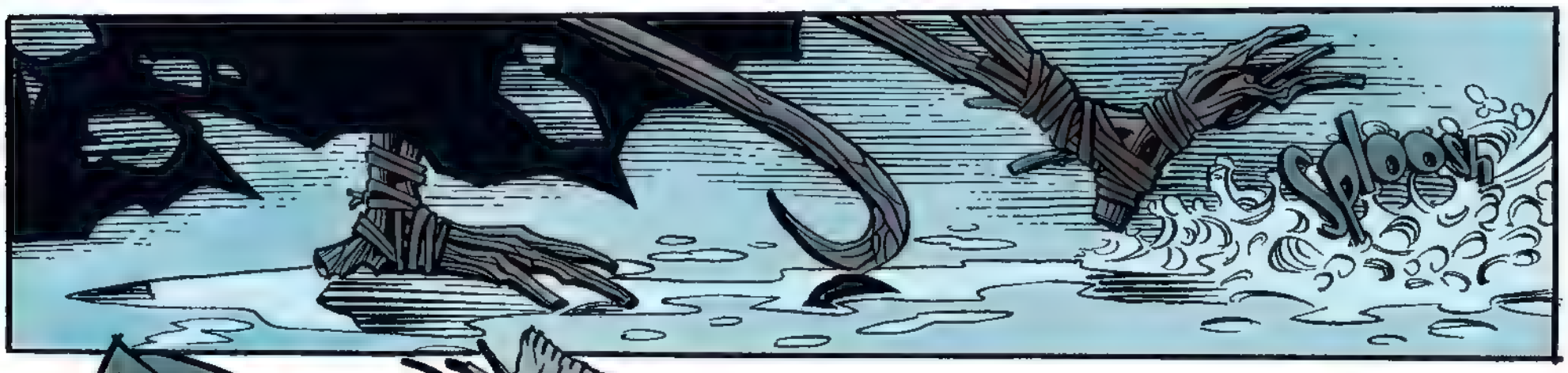
GRAH!!!

SKREEEEEEEEEEE

LOOK OUT! ANOTHER ONE
THANKS, MISSY. HADN'T NOTICED!


BUGGER IT!

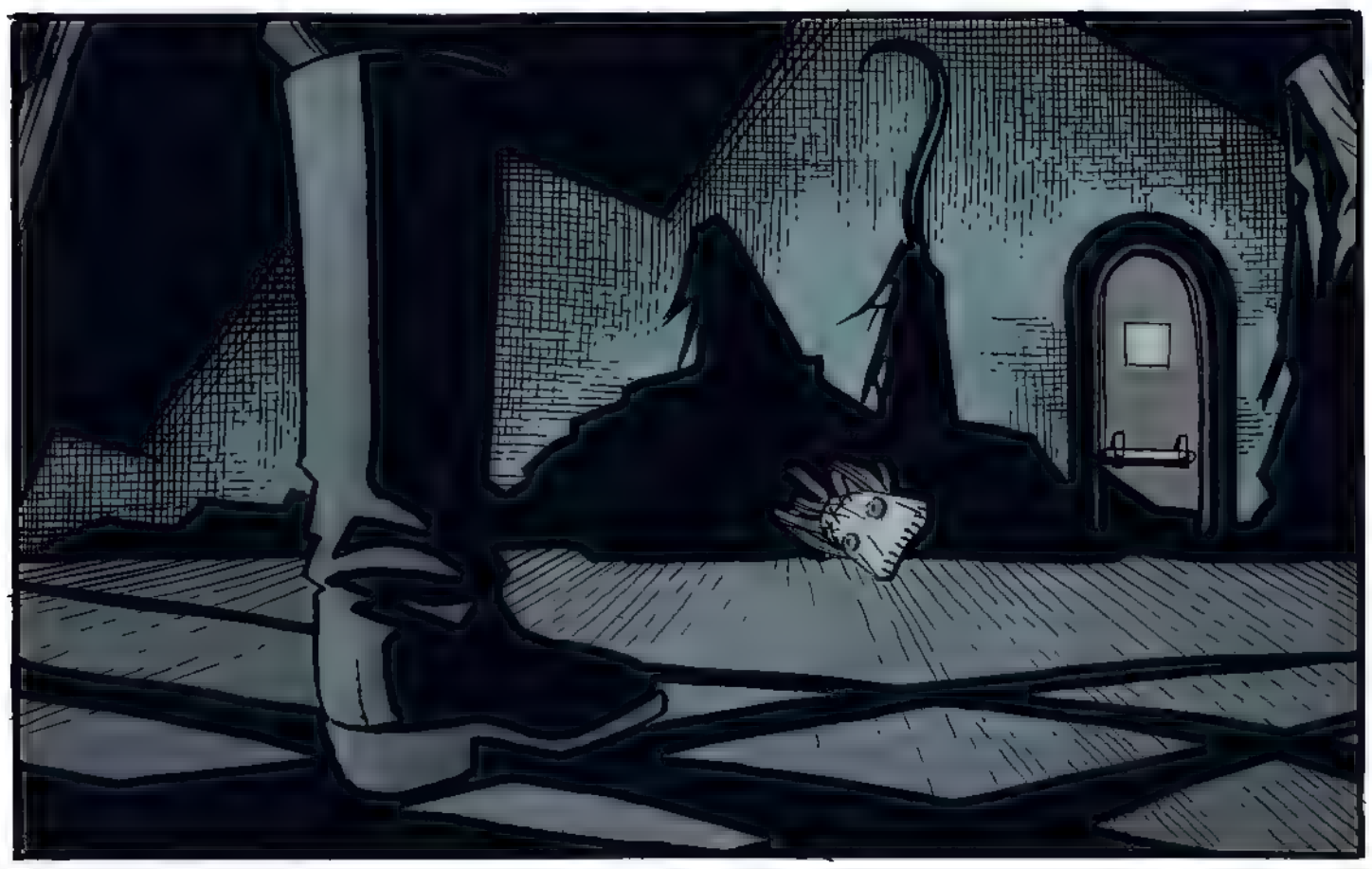
GRAH!!!


Sploosh

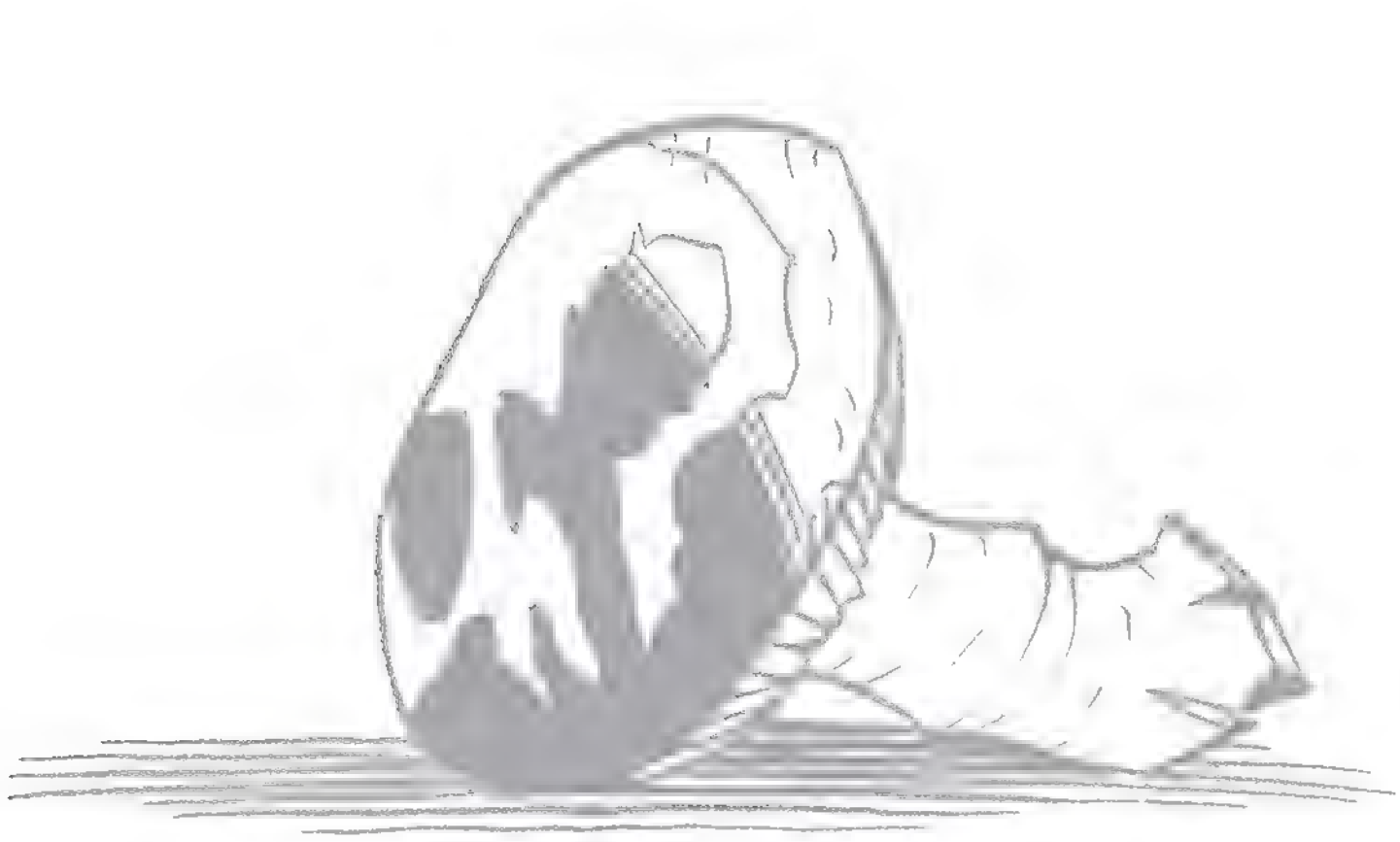
GRASSHH!

KEEP DOOR CLOSED AT ALL TIMES

KEEP DOOR CLOSED AT ALL TIMES
SNAP



Chapter Four



THE JAUNDICE ROOT, PLEASE.

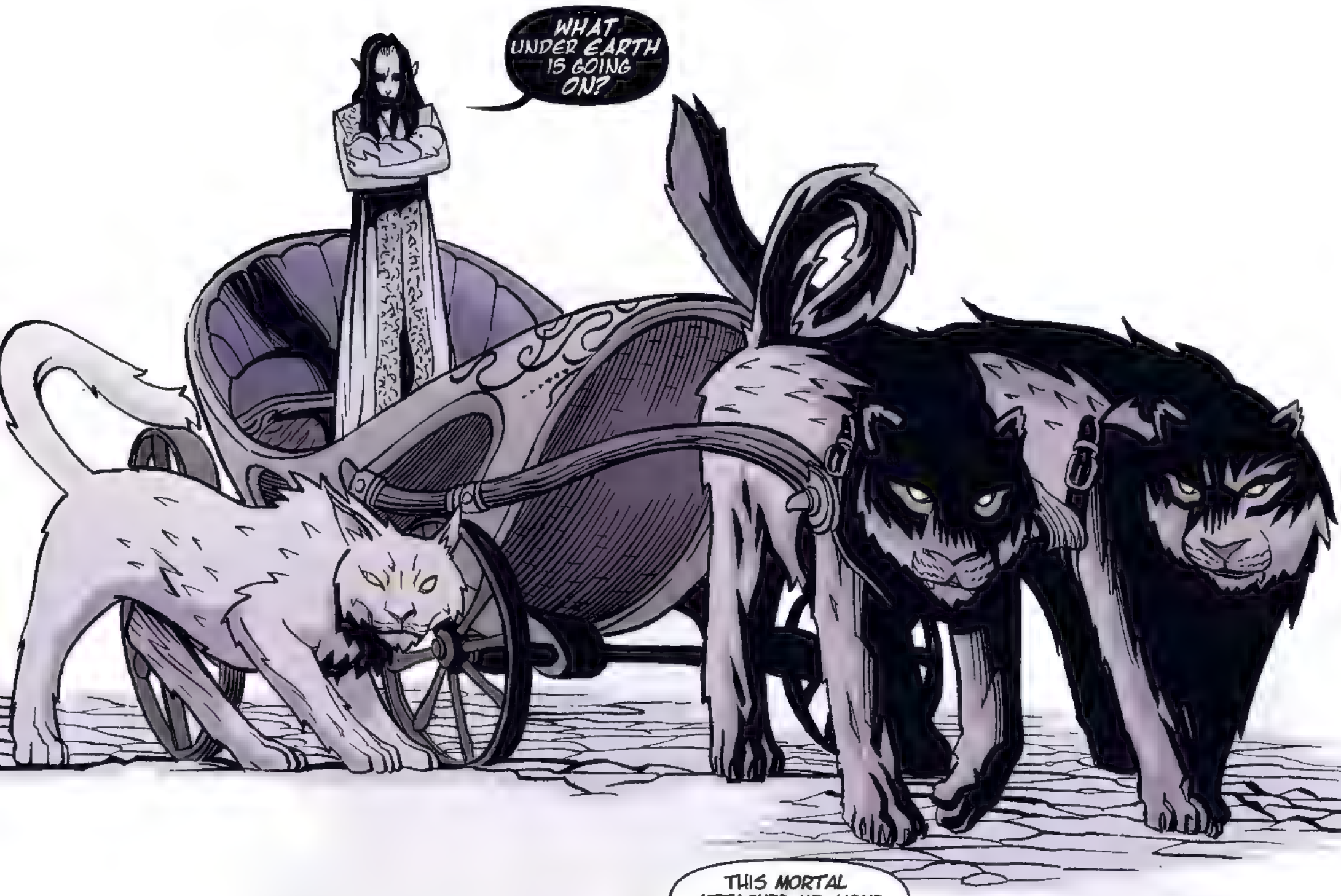
SIX SHILLINGS.

OW, HEY!

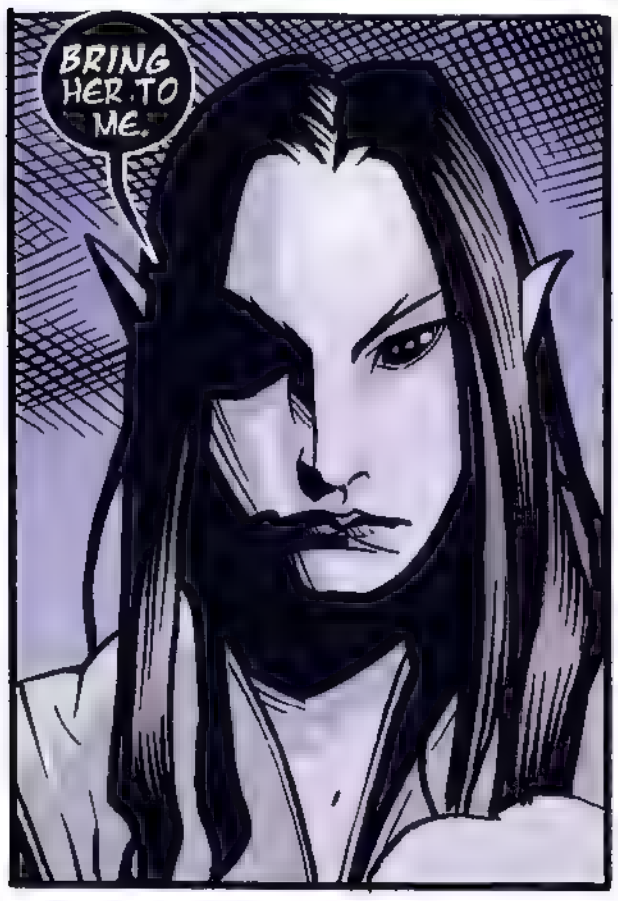
A MORTAL! A MORTAL!

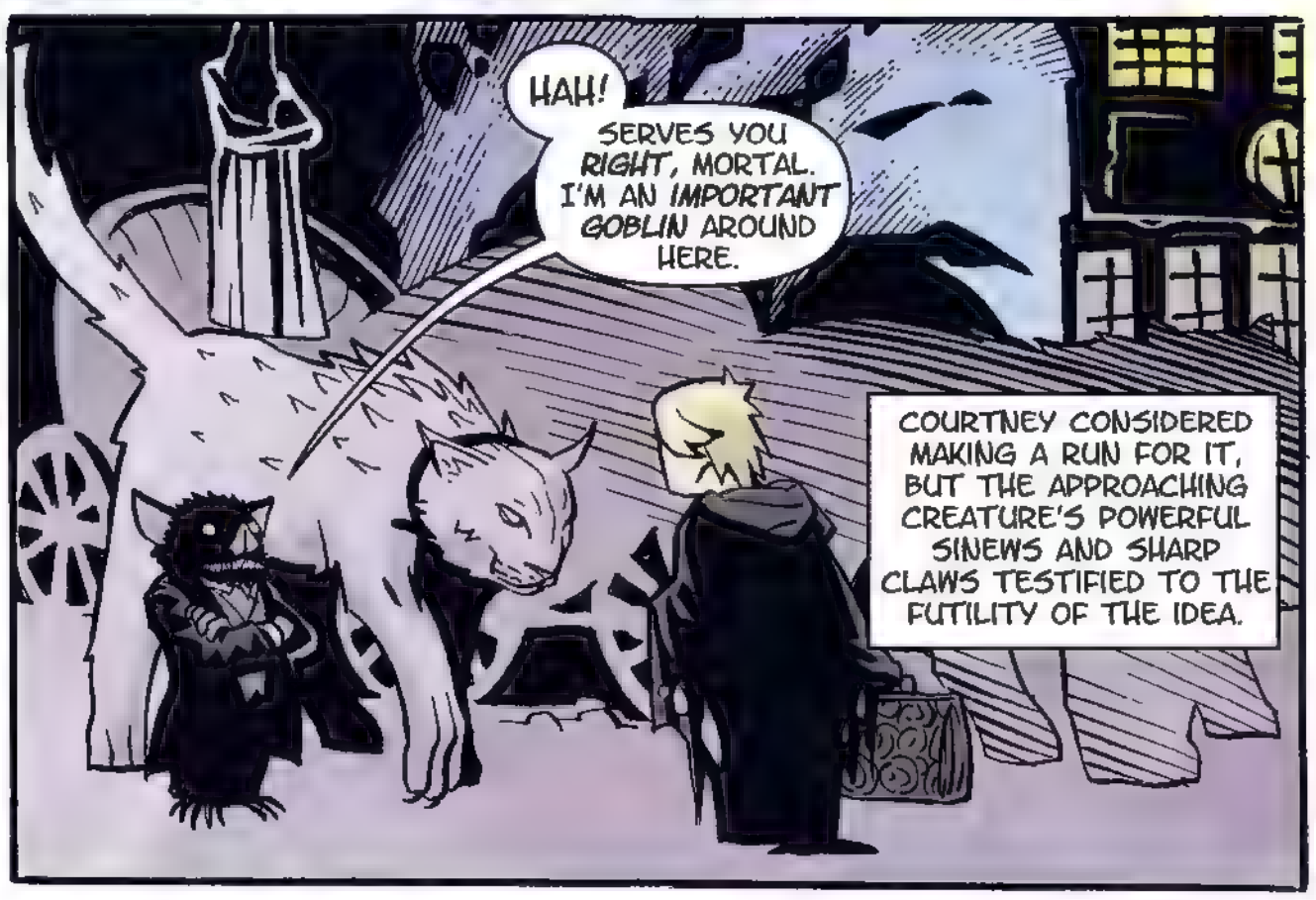
MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, FUZZY!

ANYBODY ELSE WANT SOME O' THIS!?!

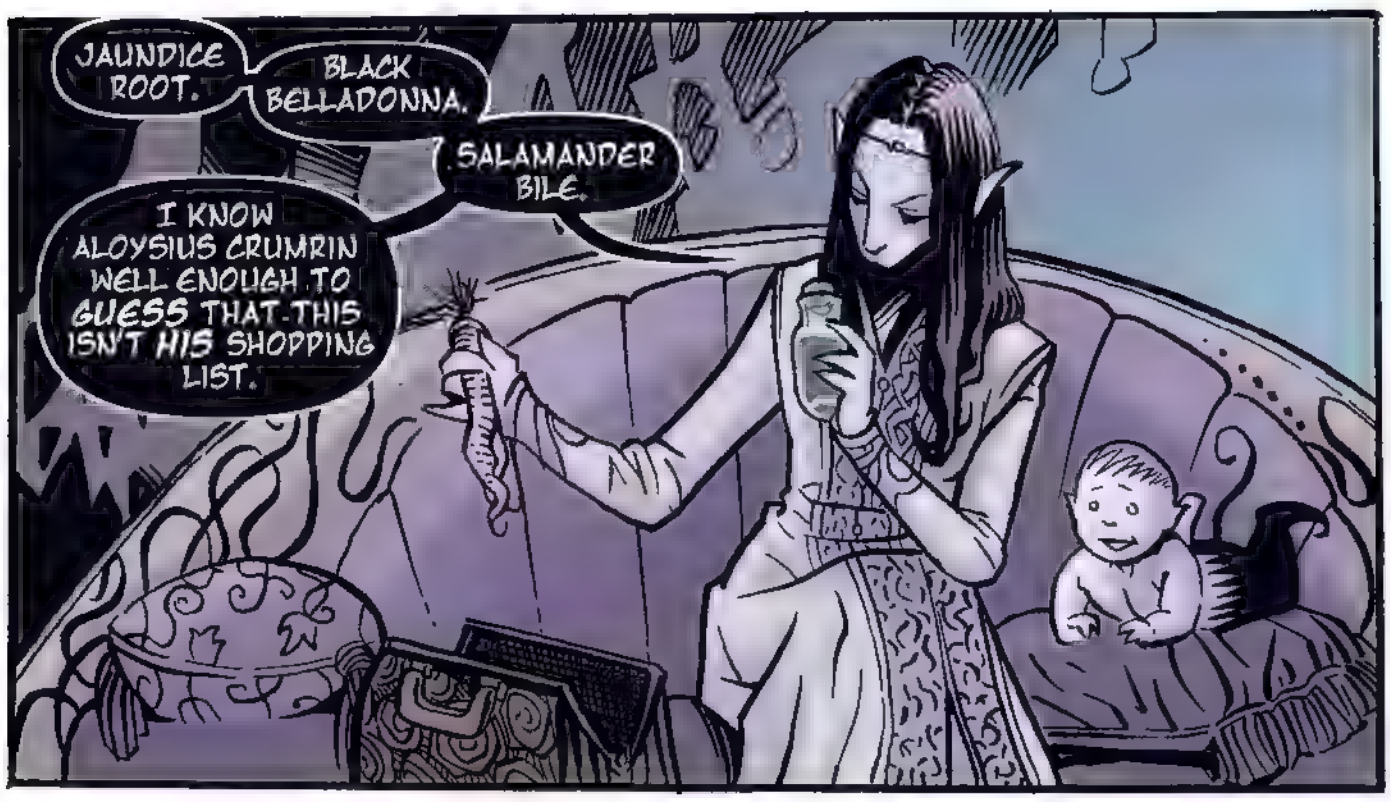

WHAT UNDER EARTH IS GOING ON?

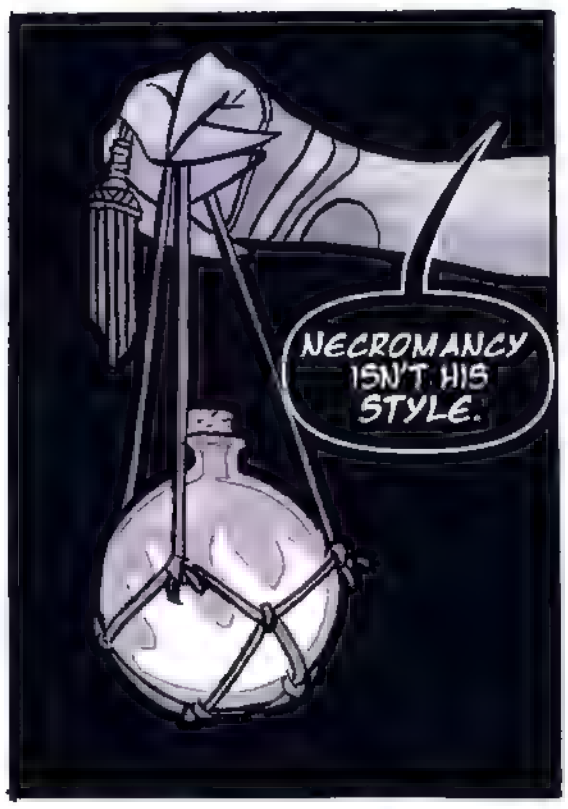
THIS MORTAL ATTACKED ME, YOUR DREADFULNESS.
YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT, PAL.
BACK OFF UNLESS YOU WANT ANOTHER ONE!


BRING HER TO ME.


HAH!
SERVES YOU RIGHT, MORTAL. I'M AN IMPORTANT GOBLIN AROUND HERE.
COURTNEY CONSIDERED MAKING A RUN FOR IT, BUT THE APPROACHING CREATURE'S POWERFUL SINEWS AND SHARP CLAWS TESTIFIED TO THE FUTILITY OF THE IDEA.

MY UNCLE WON'T LIKE THIS.
HONESTLY, MY DEAR. SUCH CHILDISH THREATS ARE BENEATH YOU.

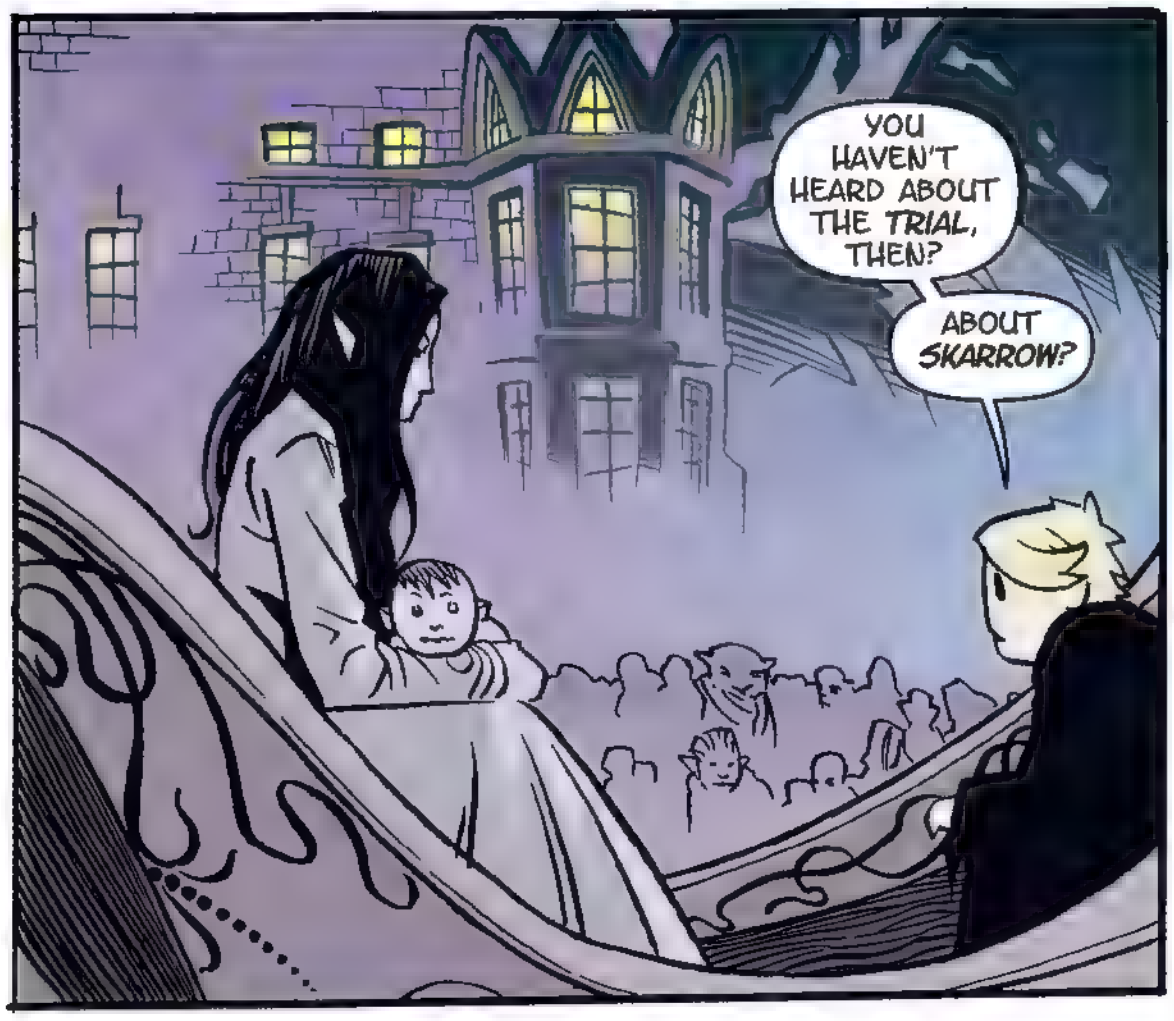

JAUNDICE ROOT.
BLACK BELLADONNA.
SALAMANDER BILE.
I KNOW ALOYSIUS CRUMRIN WELL ENOUGH TO GUESS THAT THIS ISN'T HIS SHOPPING LIST.


NECROMANCY ISN'T HIS STYLE.

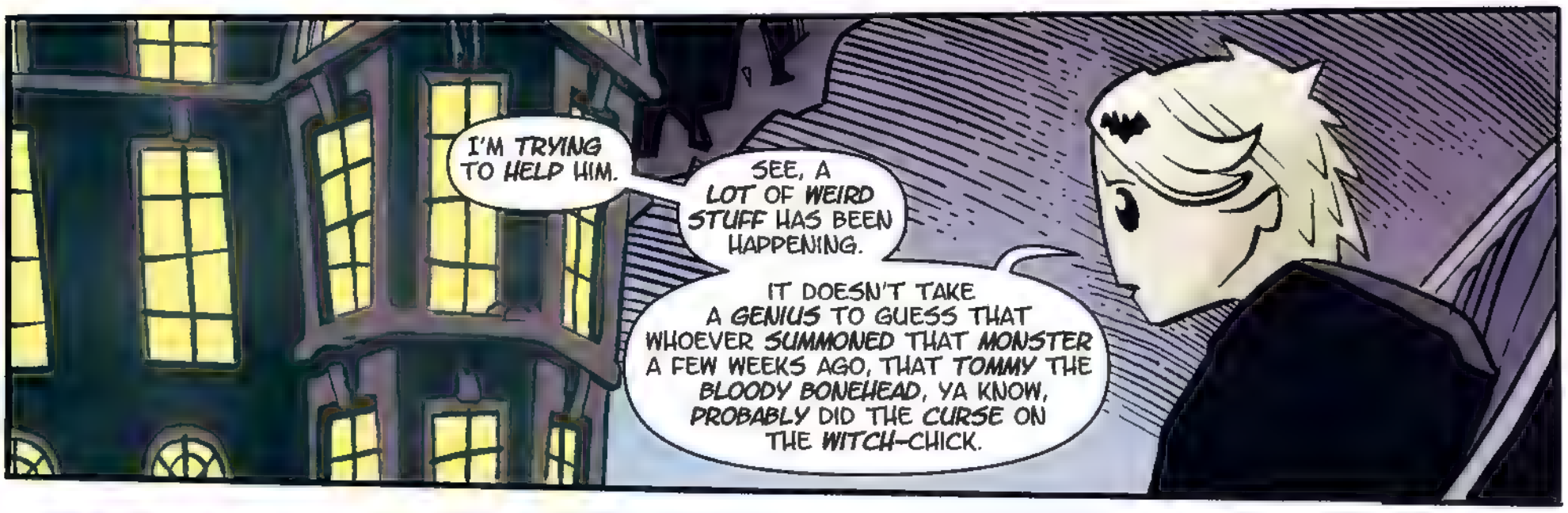
A LITTLE HOBBY OF YOUR OWN?

WHAT'S IT TO YOU?
NOTHING. HUMAN AFFAIRS ARE ALL ONE TO ME.

SO LONG AS THEY DON'T INVOLVE MY PEOPLE.


YOU HAVEN'T HEARD ABOUT THE TRIAL, THEN?
ABOUT SKARROW?

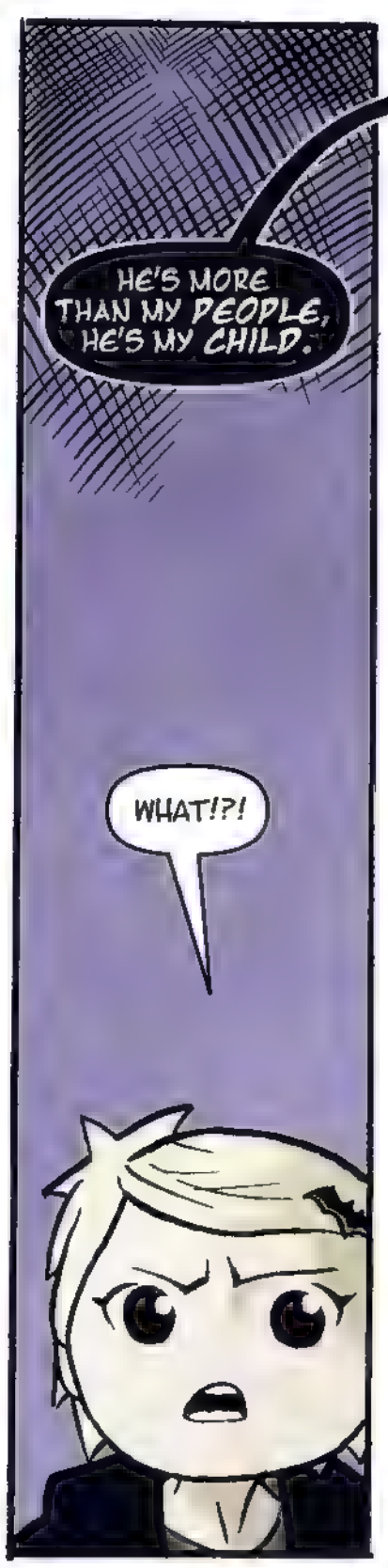
I'VE HEARD, CHILD.


I'M TRYING TO HELP HIM.
SEE, A LOT OF WEIRD STUFF HAS BEEN HAPPENING.
IT DOESN'T TAKE A GENIUS TO GUESS THAT WHOEVER SUMMONED THAT MONSTER A FEW WEEKS AGO, THAT TOMMY THE BLOODY BONEHEAD, YA KNOW, PROBABLY DID THE CURSE ON THE WITCH-CHICK.

WHY DO YOU CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO A NIGHT THING?

I DON'T KNOW. 'CAUSE I LIKE HIM, I GUESS.
I FIGURE HE'S GOT SOME MAGICAL AURA, LIKE A GLAMOUR SPELL. I'M NOT STUPID, I'VE NOTICED. BUT EVEN SO, IT'S NOT FAIR TO BLAME HIM FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S CRAP.

I SEE.
HE'S ONE OF YOUR PEOPLE, ISN'T HE? YOU'RE A BIG SHOT DOWN HERE. CAN'T YOU HELP?


HE'S MORE THAN MY PEOPLE, HE'S MY CHILD.
WHAT!?!

CENTURIES AGO, HE WAS A HUMAN BOY.
I TOOK HIM AS MY OWN, AND LEFT A CHANGELING IN HIS PLACE.
BUT AT LAST HE YEARNED FOR THE HUMAN WORLD AND LEFT ME.
HUH! WHAT THE HECK WOULD HE DO THAT FOR?

I DO NOT KNOW.

HE ONCE TOLD ME THAT HE SOUGHT IN HUMAN AFFECTION A WARMTH WHICH MY PEOPLE DON'T POSSESS.

I'VE NOT SEEN HIM IN MANY YEARS.

BUT HE'S STILL YOUR SON. YOU CAN HELP HIM.

NO. WHEN HE LEFT THE UNDERWORLD, HE PUT HIMSELF BEYOND MY AID.

I WILL NOT INTERFERE.

YEAH, I GET IT. AND YOU REALLY DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY HE LEFT?

I WILL DO SOMETHING FOR HIM.

I WILL LET YOU RETURN TO THE WORLD ABOVE.

I HAVE NO ILLUSIONS ABOUT HIS CHANCES WITH YOUR FELLOW MORTALS...

BUT PERHAPS YOUR COMPANY WILL MAKE HIS LAST DAYS SWEETER.

YEAH. THANKS A BUNCH.

OH, AND MORTAL?

YEAH?

IF HE HAS ANY GLAMOUR, IT IS A KIND NATURAL TO YOUR FOLK, NOT MINE.

"PERHAPS", THOUGHT COURTNEY, "IT WAS TRUE THAT HUMANS WERE MORE CAPABLE OF LOVE AND AFFECTION." THINGS THAT COURTNEY HAD KNOWN LITTLE OF UNTIL RECENTLY.

BUT THEY WERE CERTAINLY MORE CAPABLE OF CRUELTY AND VIOLENCE, AT LEAST, SO FAR AS SHE'D SEEN. EVEN THE WORST NIGHT THING SHE'D EVER MET WAS DRIVEN TO KILL BY SOME HUMAN MONSTER.

YOU *BLEW* IT, LEAVING *YOUR* PEOPLE TO BE WITH *US*.

WHAT'S *HERMIA HARKEN* EVER DONE FOR *YOU*?

SHE *LOVED* YOU, *DIDN'T* SHE?

COURTNEY UNDERSTOOD SKARROW'S SILENCE BETTER THAN ANY WORDS.

"THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT BEING CARED FOR," SHE THOUGHT. SOMETHING MAGICAL.

Creative writing:
Just because it happened to you doesn't make it interesting!

"SKARROW"...

BY...

UM ...COURTNEY CRUMRIN.

GO AHEAD, COURTNEY.

>SNORT<

HIS SWEETNESS SHINES LIKE A LIGHT...

FROM EYES OF BLACKEST...

.NIGHT

AND WITHOUT A SINGLE WORD...

HE SAYS..

UM... HE SAYS... THE NICEST THINGS I'VE...

...EVER...

...HEARD.

>TITTER<

>SHHH<

DIMLY, AS COURTNEY READ AND THE HOTNESS OF EMBARRASSMENT FLUSHED HER FACE, SHE THOUGHT SHE COULD HEAR A THUNDERCLAP.

BUT PEOPLE *FEAR* AN OPEN *HEART*.

THE ROOM SEEMED TO DARKEN.

AND TEAR INNOCENCE *APART*.

HE'S CALLED A *MONSTER* BY THE *FOOLS*...

A DULL SENSE OF TOTAL HUMILIATION RESTED FIRMLY ON HER CHEST, MAKING BREATHING DIFFICULT, BUT SHE PLUNGED ON.

ROLLING THUNDER SHOOK THE ROOM, AND THE CHAIRS BEGAN TO VIBRATE.

WHO *TREAT* HIS KIND LIKE *PETS* AND *TOOLS*.

Spak

COURTNEY BARELY NOTICED, HER ONE THOUGHT TO GET THROUGH HER STUPID POEM AND BE DONE WITH IT.

I WISH I KNEW THE PERFECT *CHARM*...

TO *SAVE* HIM FROM THOSE WHO MEAN HIM *HARM*.

Courtney's Journal

Creati

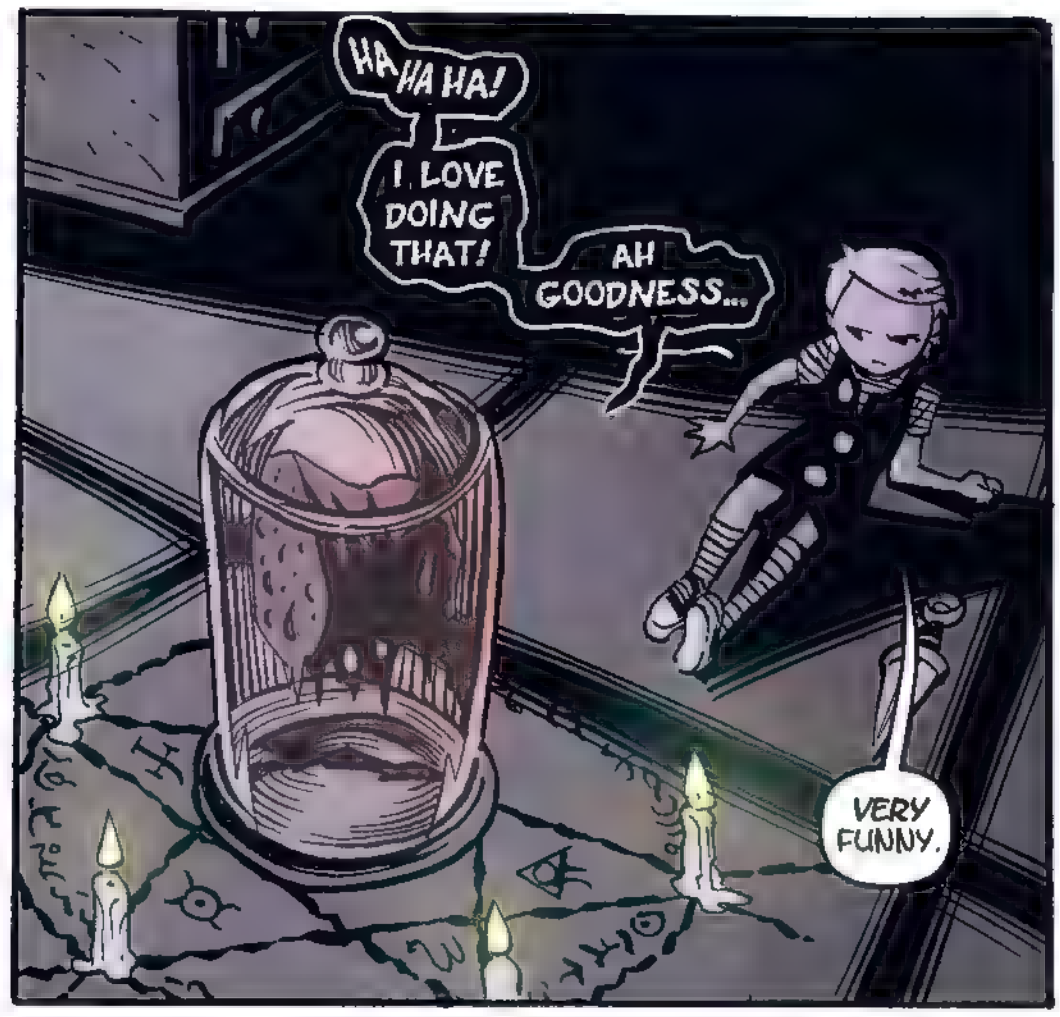
because i

't mak

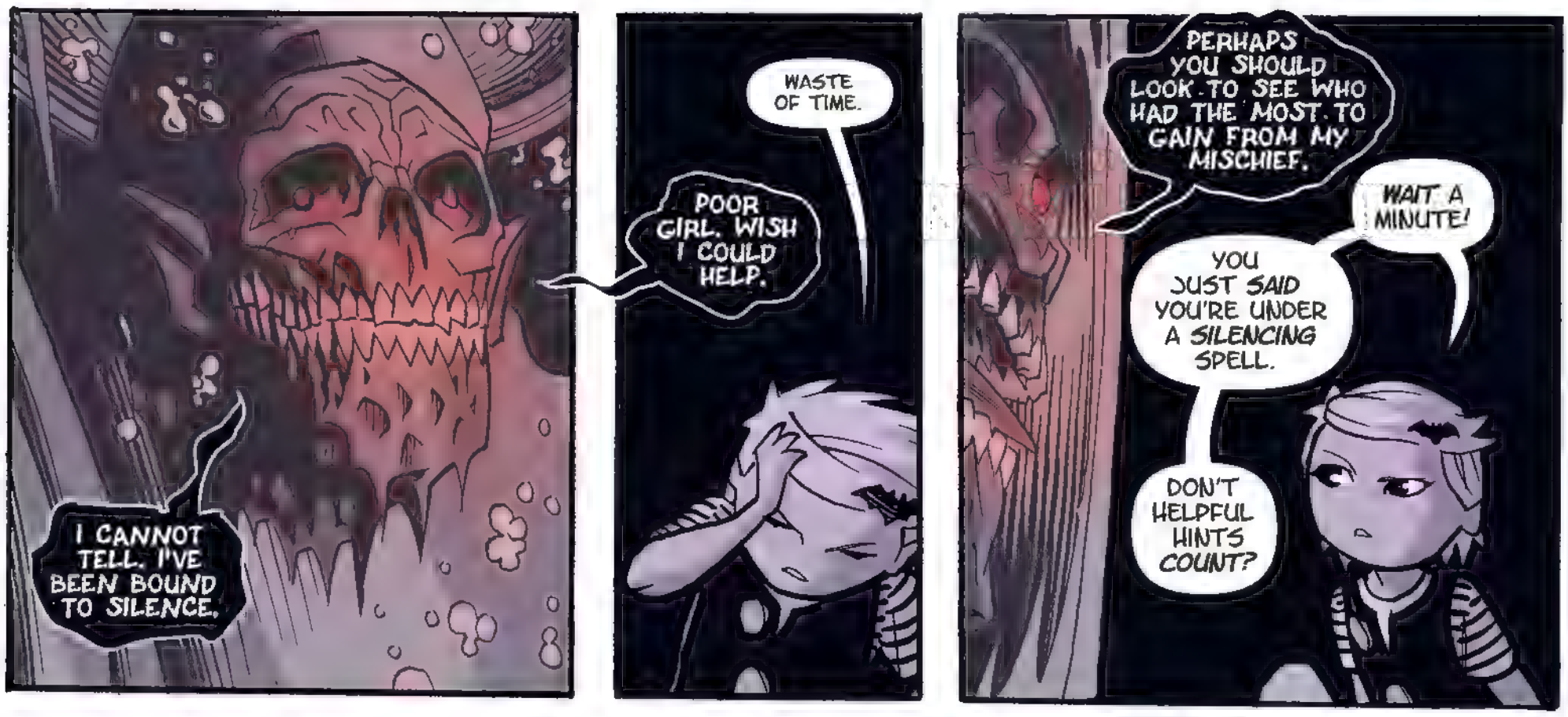
MY GOODNESS.
THAT WAS... POWERFUL STUFF, COURTNEY.
GOOD JOB.
PHEW.
WOW. THAT WAS A... REALLY COOL...
...POEM.
UH, THANKS.
DO YOU WANT TO WALK *HOME* WITH ME?
WHY?
WELL, CAUSE, LIKE, YOU'RE PRETTY *COOL*, AND... UM...
YOU KNOW THOSE *GUYS* THAT HANG OUT BY THE *PLAYGROUND*?
THEY'RE *SCARED* OF YOU, *RIGHT*?
YEAH, THEY *ARE*.
SO *NOW*, AFTER *IGNORING* ME ALL *LAST* YEAR, YOU'RE SUDDENLY MY *BUDDY*?
I GOT MORE *IMPORTANT* THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT THAN *YOUR* FIFTY-DOLLAR-A-DAY *ALLOWANCE*.
FINE! BE THAT WAY.
JERK.

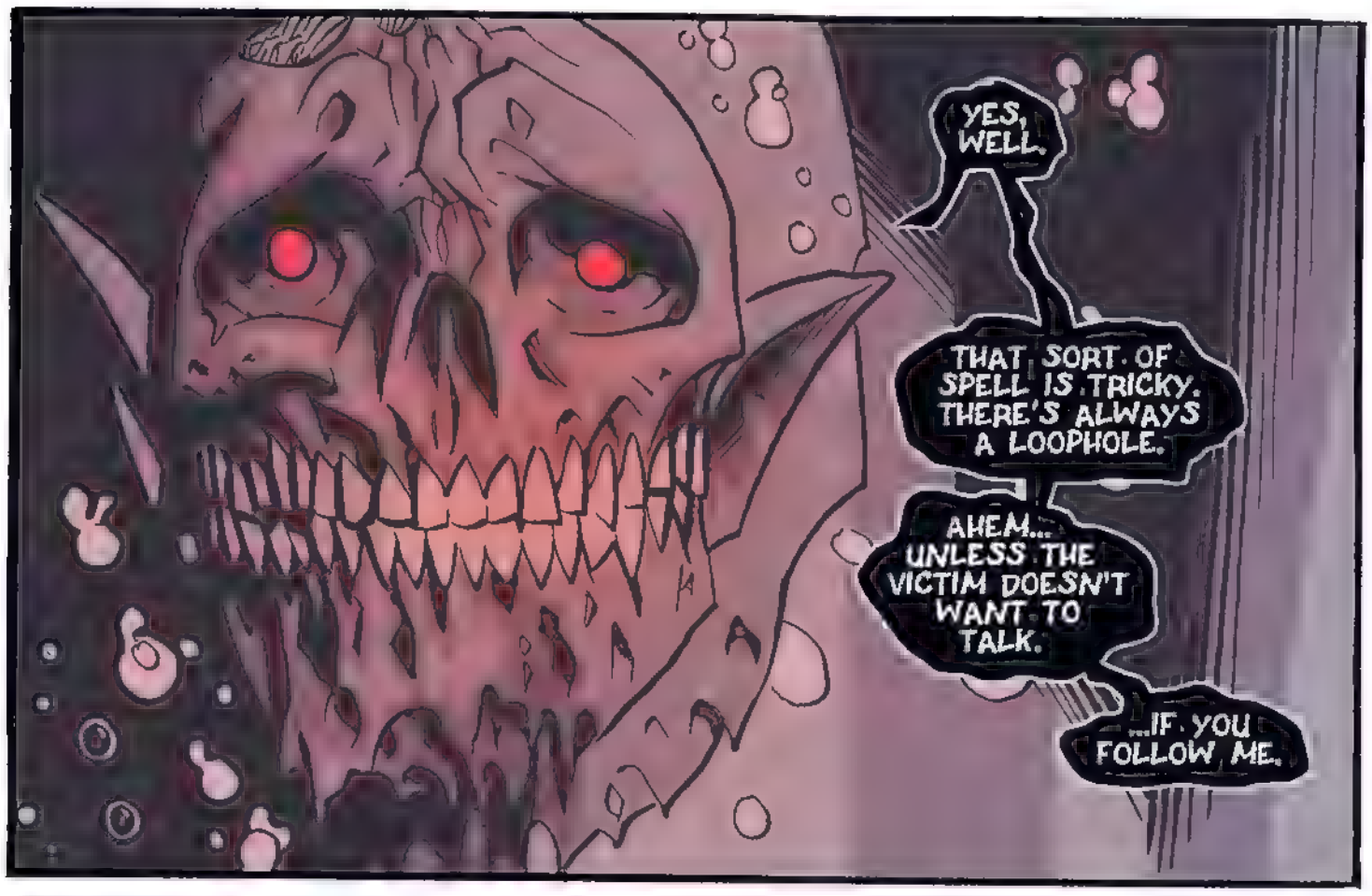
O, DREADFUL SPIRIT, HEED MY CALL BY ELDRITCH POWER I THEE ENTHRALL.

SPEAK YE NOW THROUGH LIPS CLAY COLD DIVULGE THY SECRETS YET UNTOLD.

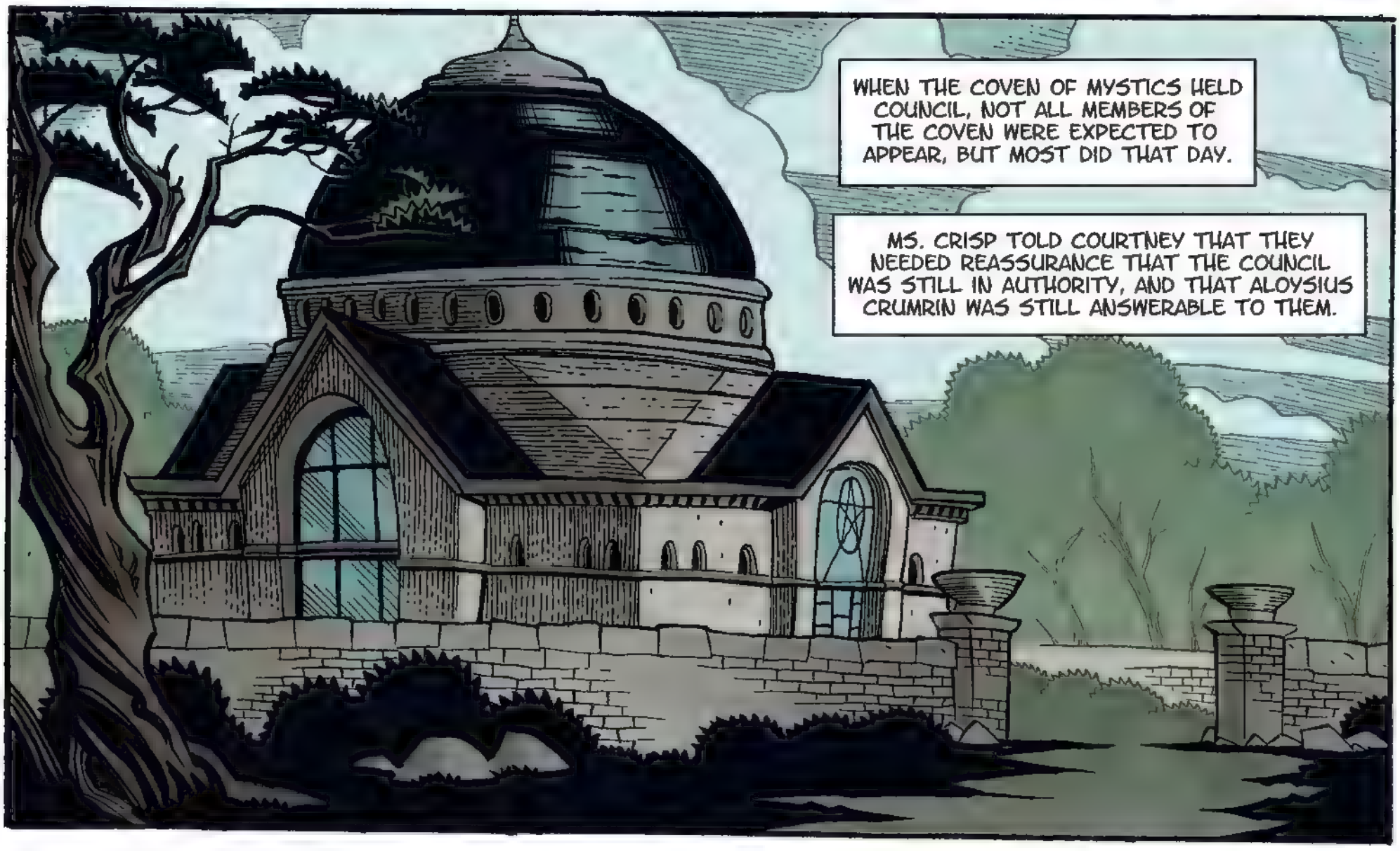


WHAT HAPPENED TO MY BODY?
UNCLE A, YOU KNOW, THE WARLOCK WHO KICKED YOUR ASS...
HE SAID THEY BURNED IT AND THREW THE ASHES INTO THE MARL-PIT.
OH WELL. I'VE HAD WORSE.
SO WHO SUMMONED YOU?


I CANNOT TELL. I'VE BEEN BOUND TO SILENCE.
POOR GIRL. WISH I COULD HELP.
WASTE OF TIME.
PERHAPS YOU SHOULD LOOK TO SEE WHO HAD THE MOST TO GAIN FROM MY MISCHIEF.
WAIT A MINUTE!
YOU JUST SAID YOU'RE UNDER A SILENCING SPELL.
DON'T HELPFUL HINTS COUNT?


YES, WELL.
THAT SORT OF SPELL IS TRICKY. THERE'S ALWAYS A LOOPHOLE.
AHEM... UNLESS THE VICTIM DOESN'T WANT TO TALK.
...IF YOU FOLLOW ME.

HMM. I THINK I DO...


WHEN THE COVEN OF MYSTICS HELD COUNCIL, NOT ALL MEMBERS OF THE COVEN WERE EXPECTED TO APPEAR, BUT MOST DID THAT DAY.
MS. CRISP TOLD COURTNEY THAT THEY NEEDED REASSURANCE THAT THE COUNCIL WAS STILL IN AUTHORITY, AND THAT ALOYSIUS CRUMRIN WAS STILL ANSWERABLE TO THEM.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MEMBERS OF THE COVEN OF MYSTICS...

I'D LIKE YOU ALL TO CONSIDER WHAT IT IS THAT BINDS US TOGETHER AS WITCHES AND WARLOCKS.

IS IT POWER THAT BINDS US, THE PURSUIT OF POWER? I THINK NOT. FOR WE DO NOT INTERFERE IN THE AFFAIRS OF THE LARGER WORLD, OR SEEK MASTERY OVER LESSER PEOPLES.

WHAT IS IT, THEN?

I SUGGEST THAT IT IS KNOWLEDGE.

IT IS KNOWLEDGE THAT BINDS US; SHARED WISDOM FROM AGES PAST, AND NEW WISDOM THAT WE SHOULD ALL SEEK TO EMBRACE.

WISDOM IS OUR LEGACY; OUR REFUGE FROM THE WORLD OF THE IGNORANT AND THE FOOLISH.

WE CHOSE THIS PATH THAT WE MIGHT WALK OPEN-EYED INTO THE FUTURE..

UNDAUNTED BY FEAR AND LIES.

AND YET, SOME OF US STILL ARE BESET BY LIES, HANDED DOWN FROM OLDEN TIMES.

THE LIE PASSED DOWN THE GENERATIONS IS NO LESS UNTRUE THAN ANY OTHER SORT, THOUGH IT MAY BE HARDER TO DISCOVER. BUT IT IS OUR VERY PURPOSE TO DISPEL LIES, AND FIND THE TRUTH.

THE CURSE THAT HAS AFFLICTED ONE OF OUR NUMBER IS NO CREATION OF ANY SIMPLE CREATURE OF THE UNDERWORLD.

IT IS COMPLEX AND SUBTLE, DESIGNED FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONCEALING THE TRUTH AND PERPETUATING LIES.

DO NOT BE FOOLED, FOR ITS VERY NATURE REVEALS IT.

JOHN MILTON MANDRAKE COUNCIL MEMBER 1878 - 2002

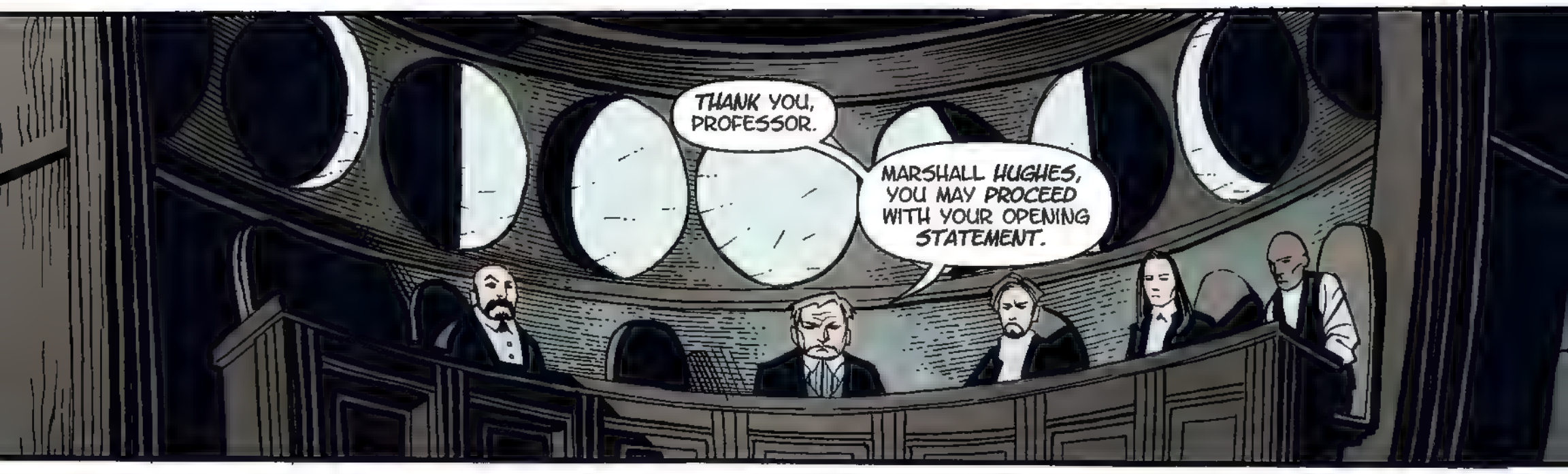
THE NIGHT THINGS ARE NOT CREATURES OF DECEIT. THAT IS THE REALM OF MEN.

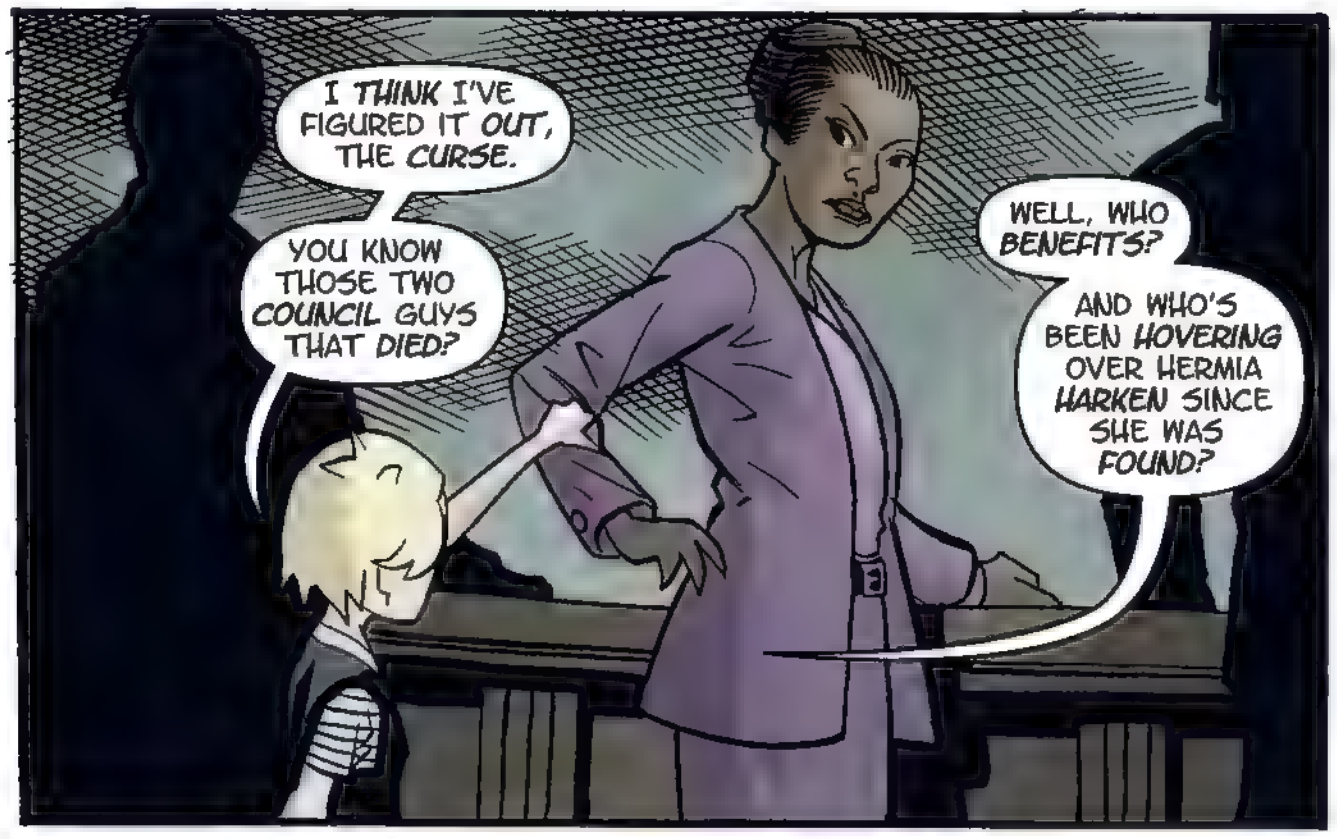
CHARLES LONDON COUNCIL MEMBER 1962 - 2002

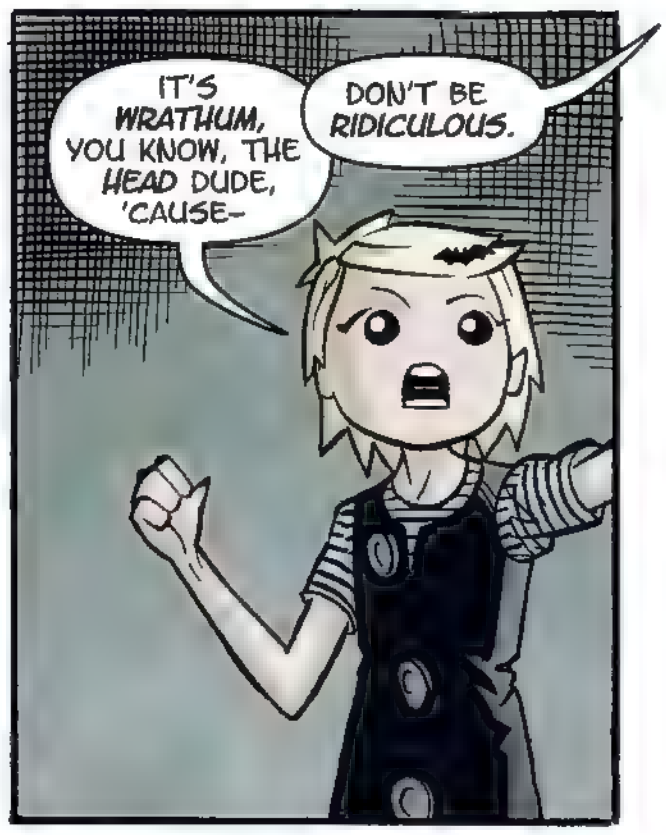
THE DARKNESS THAT WE SEEK TO KEEP AT BAY DOES NOT COME FROM THE UNDERWORLD. IT IS OUR DARKNESS, FROM WITHIN OUR OWN HEARTS.

THE SLAYING OF A SCAPEGOAT WILL NOT STOP IT. THAT PATH WILL ONLY FEED THE LIES.

MANDRAKE...


THANK YOU, PROFESSOR.
MARSHALL HUGHES, YOU MAY PROCEED WITH YOUR OPENING STATEMENT.


I THINK I'VE FIGURED IT OUT, THE CURSE.
YOU KNOW THOSE TWO COUNCIL GUYS THAT DIED?
WELL, WHO BENEFITS?
AND WHO'S BEEN HOVERING OVER HERMIA HARKEN SINCE SHE WAS FOUND?


IT'S WRATHUM, YOU KNOW, THE HEAD DUDE, 'CAUSE-
DON'T BE RIDICULOUS.

CONSIDERING HE APPOINTED BOTH THOSE COUNCIL MEMBERS, WOODRUE WRATHUM IS THE LEAST LIKELY SUSPECT.
HE'S PRAYING THE REST OF THE COUNCIL ACCEPTS HIS NEW APPOINTMENT. IF NOT, HE LOSES THE MAJORITY AND STOCKBROOK WILL BE VOTED COUNCIL HEAD.

BUT WHO WILL HE...?
THANK YOU, COUNCILMAN WRATHUM.

I'D LIKE TO BEGIN BY EXPRESSING MY UTMOST RESPECT FOR THE ESTEEMED PROFESSOR CRUMRIN. I DEEPLY REGRET THAT THESE MATTERS HAVE CAUSED HIM SO MUCH PERSONAL TURMOIL.
SUDDENLY, ALL BECAME SICKENINGLY CLEAR.

AND HECTOR'S GENTLE, TROUBLED EXPRESSION SEEMED SUDDENLY MASKLIKE, DISGUISING THE TWISTED SCHEMES BENEATH.

SURELY, HE WOULD BE COUNCILMAN WRATHUM'S NEW APPOINTMENT.

THE SESSION WENT ON FOR SEVERAL MORE HOURS.

ALOYSIUS PRESENTED HIS DETAILED KNOWLEDGE OF NIGHT THINGS, POINTED OUT THE LONG COMPANIONSHIP BETWEEN MADAM HARKEN AND SKARROW, WHICH HE'D SEEN FIRSTHAND. HE POINTED OUT HOW VAGUE THE EVIDENCE WAS FOR THE CREATURE'S GUILT, HOW THIN AND UNLIKELY ITS MOTIVATIONS.

HECTOR POINTED OUT HOW UNPLEASANT THE MATTER WAS, AND HOW RELIEVING IT WILL BE TO PUT IT BEHIND THEM ALL.

THE COUNCIL DELIBERATED FOR LESS THAN AN HOUR.

PROFESSOR, WE *APPRECIATE* YOUR *EFFORTS*, BUT I'M *AFRAID* WE FEEL YOU'VE LOST YOUR *OBJECTIVITY* IN THIS MATTER.

THE COUNCIL HAS AGREED *UNANIMOUSLY* THAT FOR THE *SAFETY* OF OUR *COMMUNITY*, YOU MUST *RELINQUISH* YOUR PRISONER TO *US*.

YES, COUNCILMAN.

THEY CAN'T-

COURTNEY, ALOYSIUS CAN'T STAND *ALONE* AGAINST THE WHOLE *COVEN*.

THEY'RE GOING TO *KILL* HIM! HE DIDN'T *DO* ANYTHING!

DON'T YOU *SEE*? THEY ALL *KNOW* THAT.

IT DOESN'T *MATTER* WHO CAST THE CURSE, WHAT *MATTERS* IS THAT THEY HAVE AN *EXCUSE* TO *PUNISH* YOUR FRIEND *SKARROW* FOR STEALING MADAM *HARKEN AWAY*, AND TO PUNISH *HERMIA* FOR CHOOSING A *NIGHT THING* OVER THE *COVEN*.

WHAT!?!

IT'S *ONE* THING FOR A MAN LIKE YOUR *UNCLE* TO WITHDRAW INTO SOLITUDE, BUT A WOMAN LIKE *HERMIA*- *UNFORGIVABLE*.

WHY?

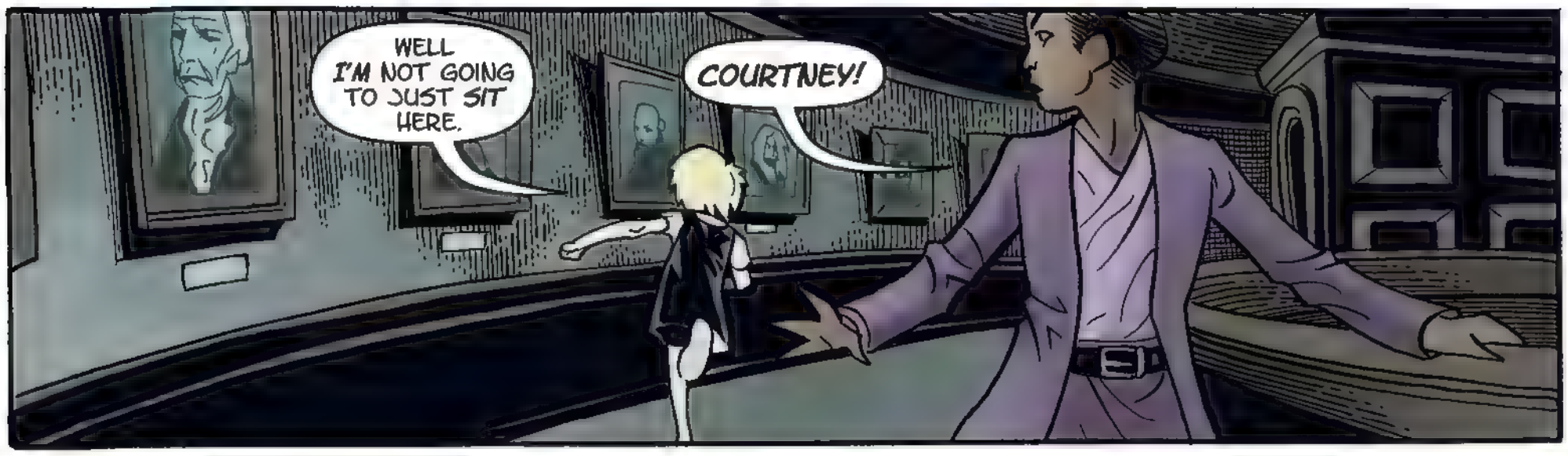
FOR *STARTERS*, HERMIA BELONGED TO AN IMPORTANT *FAMILY*.

HER *FATHER* WAS THE HEAD OF THE *COUNCIL* BEFORE *WRATHUM*. HE'D PROMISED HER TO *MARRY*...

WELL IT'S *TOO* LONG A *STORY*.

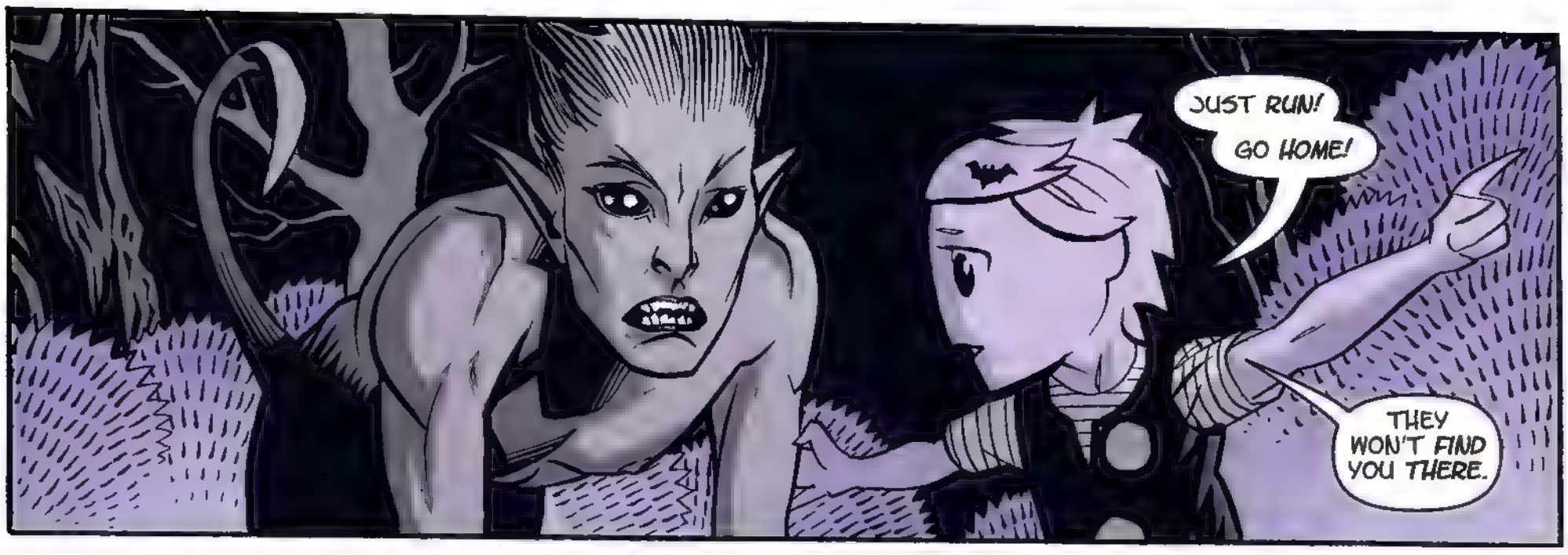
SHE SIMPLY DIDN'T *WANT* THE LIFE *CHOSEN* FOR HER, SO SHE *WALKED AWAY*.

BUT SKARROW! WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING?
ALOYSIUS THOUGHT THEY'D LISTEN TO HIM.
HE ASSUMED THAT HE COULD SIMPLY APPEAR AND EXPLAIN IT ALL, AND THEY'D UNDERSTAND.
HE MISCALCULATED.


WELL I'M NOT GOING TO JUST SIT HERE.
COURTNEY!

TAKING THE ROAD, IT WAS A FIFTEEN-MINUTE WALK TO CRUMRIN HOUSE. COURTNEY MADE IT THERE IN FIVE.

YOU'VE GOT TO GO.
NOW!


JUST RUN!
GO HOME!
THEY WON'T FIND YOU THERE.

AS SKARROW CREPT SLOWLY AWAY TOWARD A DARK OPENING INTO THE EARTH, COURTNEY WONDERED HOW MUCH HE TRULY UNDERSTOOD OF HIS DANGER.

A FIGURE, JUST VISIBLE IN THE GLOOM, WAITED. COURTNEY COULD GUESS, OR HOPE, WHO IT MIGHT BE.

GO ON!
JUST GO!

GOT 'IM.

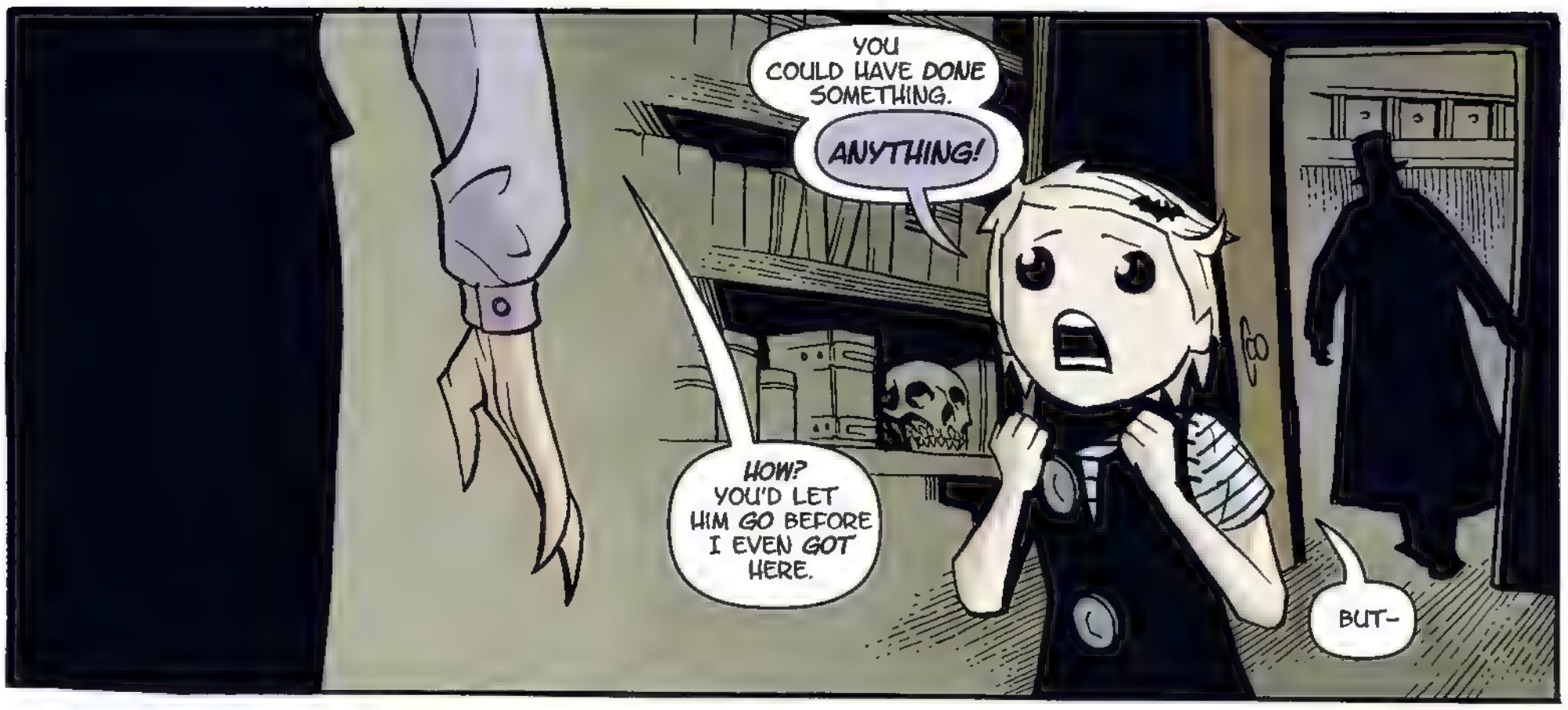
A SAD WAY FOR THIS AFFAIR TO END.
WHY? YOU WANTED BLOOD, AND YOU GOT IT.
I HOPE TO HEAVEN YOU'RE SATISFIED.

THEY KILLED HIM!
THEY KILLED HIM!

THERE THERE, YOUNG LADY-
WOODRUE!! DON'T YOU DARE SPEAK TO MY NIECE!

I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU BOTH! HOW COULD YOU LET THIS HAPPEN!?!
I CAN ASSURE YOU-
WOODRUE.

GET OUT NOW, OR SO HELP ME....


YOU COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING.
ANYTHING!
HOW? YOU'D LET HIM GO BEFORE I EVEN GOT HERE.
BUT-

COURTNEY, PLEASE!
LEAVE ME ALONE.
KRASSHHH!

A FEW DAYS LATER, IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT THE CURSE WAS BROKEN.

THE FIRST THING MADAM HARKEN SAID WAS "YES," TO MARSHAL HECTOR HUGHES' PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE.

COURTNEY LOOKED INTO HER EYES AND SAW A DEFEATED WOMAN.

LET'S *GO* BEFORE I *PUKE*.

IT'S NOT *FAIR*. SHE DIDN'T *DO* ANYTHING, SHE JUST *DIDN'T* WANT TO BE IN THEIR *STUPID COVEN*.

SHE TURNED HER *BACK* ON THE WORLD, JUST LIKE YOUR *UNCLE*. WHEN YOU DO *THAT*...

YOU CAN GET *BITTEN* ON THE *ASS*.

EXACTLY. WELL PUT.

COURTNEY WAS BEGINNING TO FIND MS. CRISP SOMEWHAT LESS AGGRAVATING LATELY, AND TALKING TO HER WAS ODDLY COMFORTING.

YOU SHOULD *FORGIVE* YOUR *UNCLE*, THOUGH.

HE *LOVES* YOU, AND THAT *OUGHT* TO COUNT FOR *SOMETHING*.

IT *DOES*.

"PERHAPS SHE HAS A POINT," THOUGHT COURTNEY. "IT IS UNWISE TO TURN YOUR BACK ON THE WORLD."

BUT IT'S DEADLY TO TURN YOUR BACK ON A CRUMRIN.

HERMIA?

HERE I AM.

I MUST SAY, THIS IS ALL RATHER *MYSTERIOUS*. WHY *THIS* PLACE?

YOUR *NOTE* SAID TO MEET HERE. IS THIS YOUR ATTEMPT AT *ROMANCE*, HECTOR? IF *SO*, IT'S IN POOR *TASTE*.

MY *NOTE*?

BUT *I* WROTE NO NOTE.

I WROTE YOU *BOTH*.

WASN'T SURE IT'D WORK, BUT YOU COVEN PEOPLE ARE NOTHING IF NOT GULLIBLE.

YOUNG LADY, IF THIS IS YOUR IDEA OF A JOKE-

NO, YOU'RE THE JOKE!
ALL THIS PLANNING, ALL THE LIES AND MURDERS, JUST SO YOU COULD BE TOP OF THE HEAP.
CONGRATS. BET YOU HARDLY NOTICED IT WAS A HEAP OF DOG CRAP.

THAT'S NO WAY TO TALK TO-
SHUT UP!
I'M SICK OF YOUR BULL.
YOU FED IT TO WOODRUE AND THE REST OF 'EM, AND THEY WERE SO GRATEFUL THEY FOLLOWED YOU LIKE TRAINED MONKEYS.

BUT NOT RIGHT NOW.
RIGHT NOW IT'S JUST YOU AND ME.

AND WHAT CAN YOU DO, LITTLE GIRL?

ME? NOT MUCH. I'M JUST A KID.

BUT YOU REMEMBER TOMMY, DON'T YOU?

HE SURE REMEMBERS YOU.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?!

I DID THE SAME THING YOU DID.

I SUMMONED A MONSTER TO DO MY DIRTY WORK.

COME ALONG NOW, LITTLE HECTOR.

DOWN TO THE BOTTOM YOU GO.

WITH ALL THE OTHER CHILDREN WHO TELL LIES AND SPEAK PROFANE CURSES.

HERMIA, HELP ME!

SAVE YOUR BREATH.

SHE CAN'T HELP *ANYONE*, NOT EVEN *HERSELF*.

LADY...

GO *AWAY* AND *NEVER* COME BACK.

OR I'LL SEE THAT THEY BLAME *YOU* FOR THIS.

WHY? WHAT HAVE *I* DONE?

YOU'VE DONE *NOTHING.*

NOTHING TO SAVE SOMEONE WHO GAVE UP HIS *WORLD* TO BE WITH YOU.

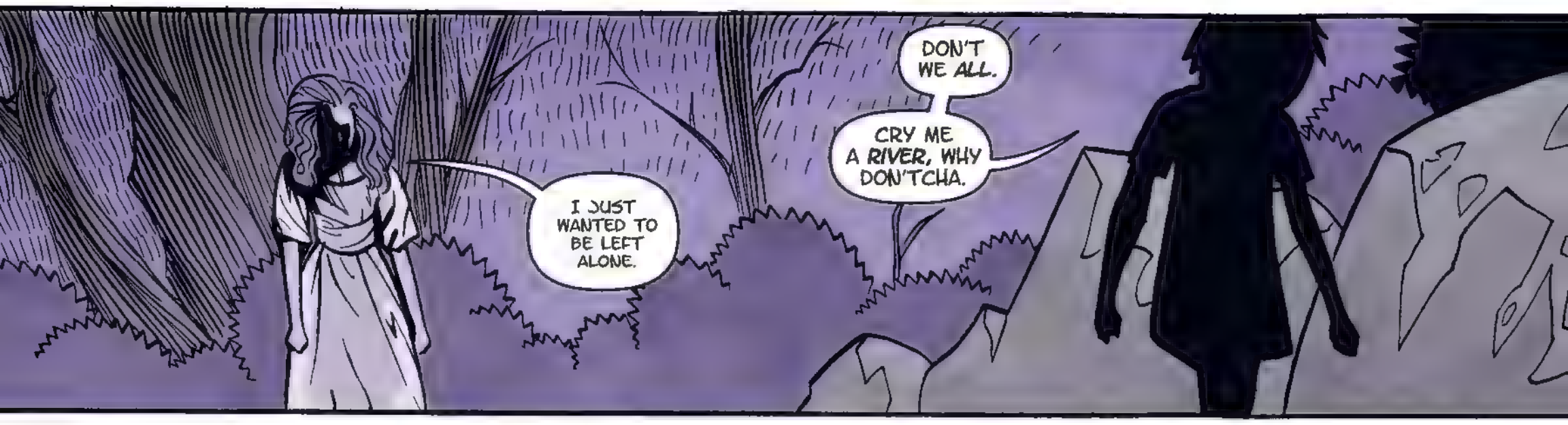
HECTOR FORCED ME *INTO* IT.

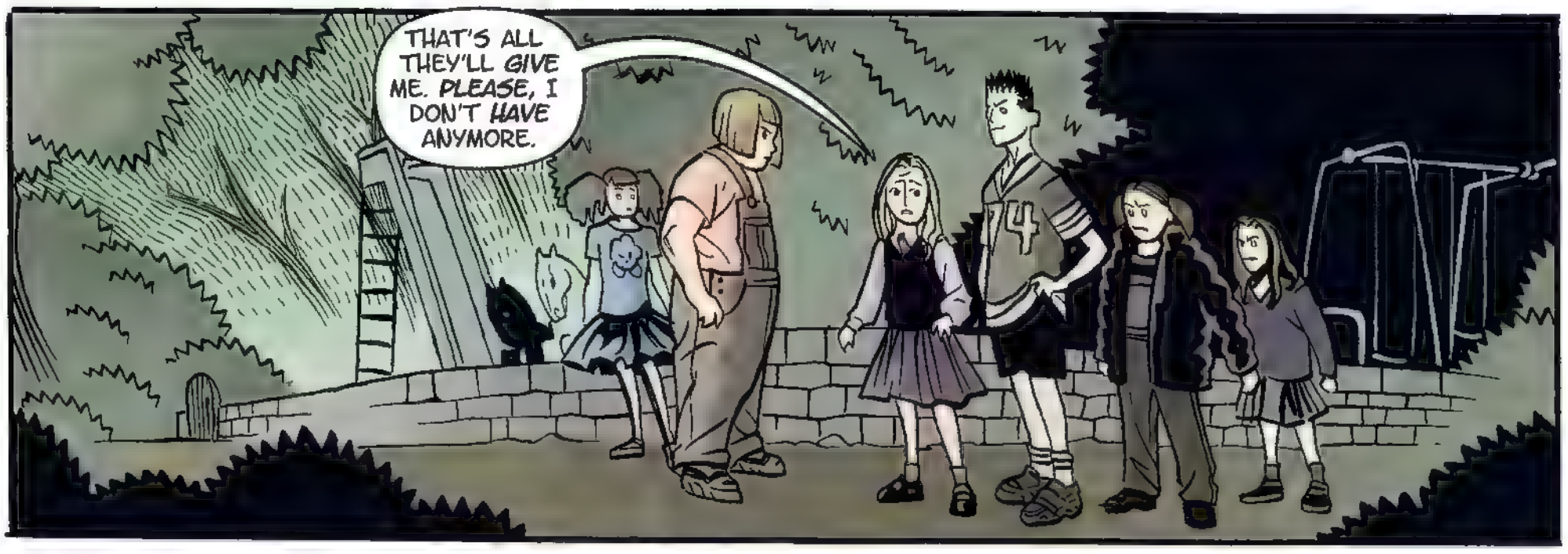
WHAT *COULD* I HAVE DONE?

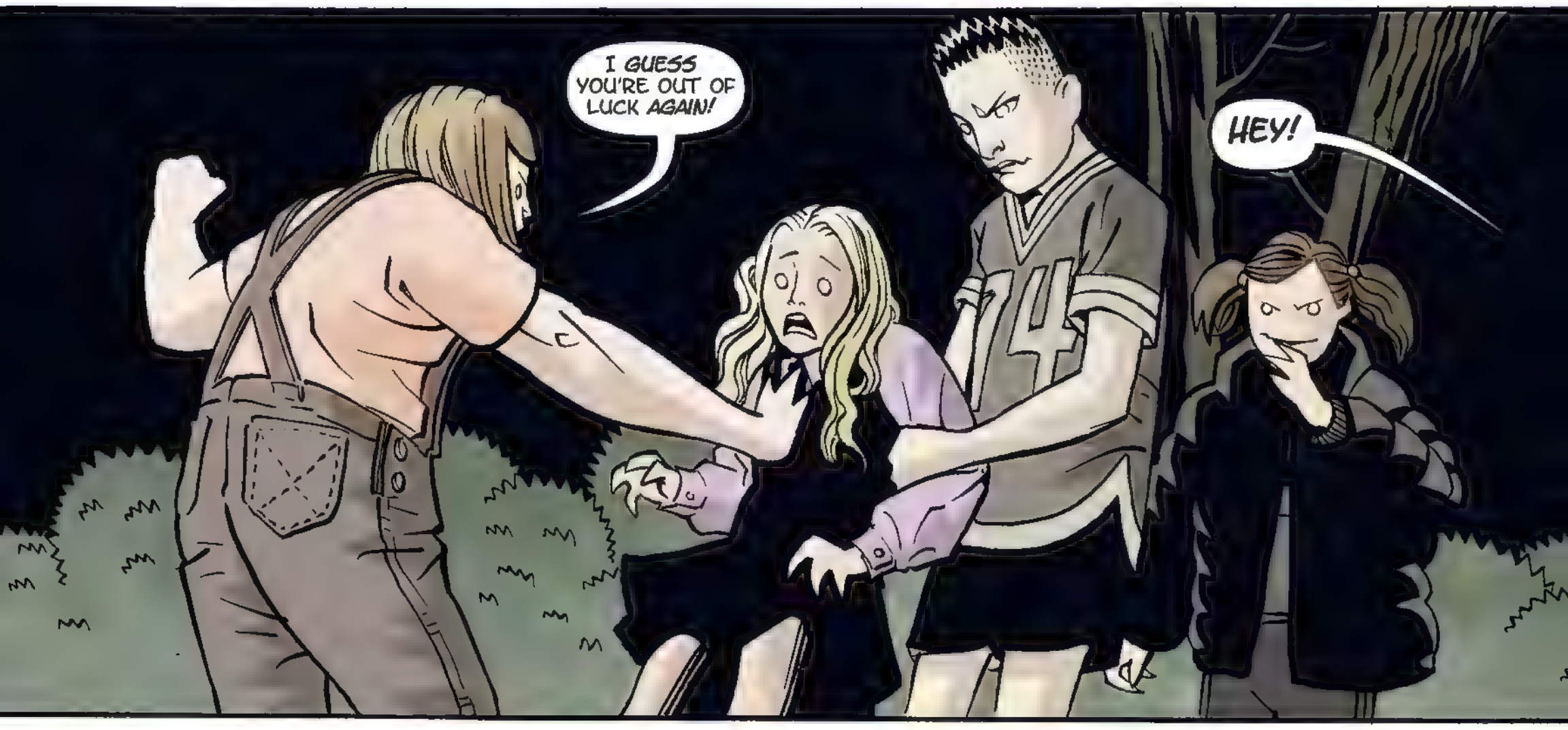
BUT YOU DID *NOTHING.* AND NOW YOU'VE *GOT* NOTHING.

SOMETHING!

ANYTHING!!!


I JUST WANTED TO BE LEFT ALONE.
DON'T WE ALL.
CRY ME A RIVER, WHY DON'TCHA.


THAT'S ALL THEY'LL GIVE ME. PLEASE, I DON'T HAVE ANYMORE.

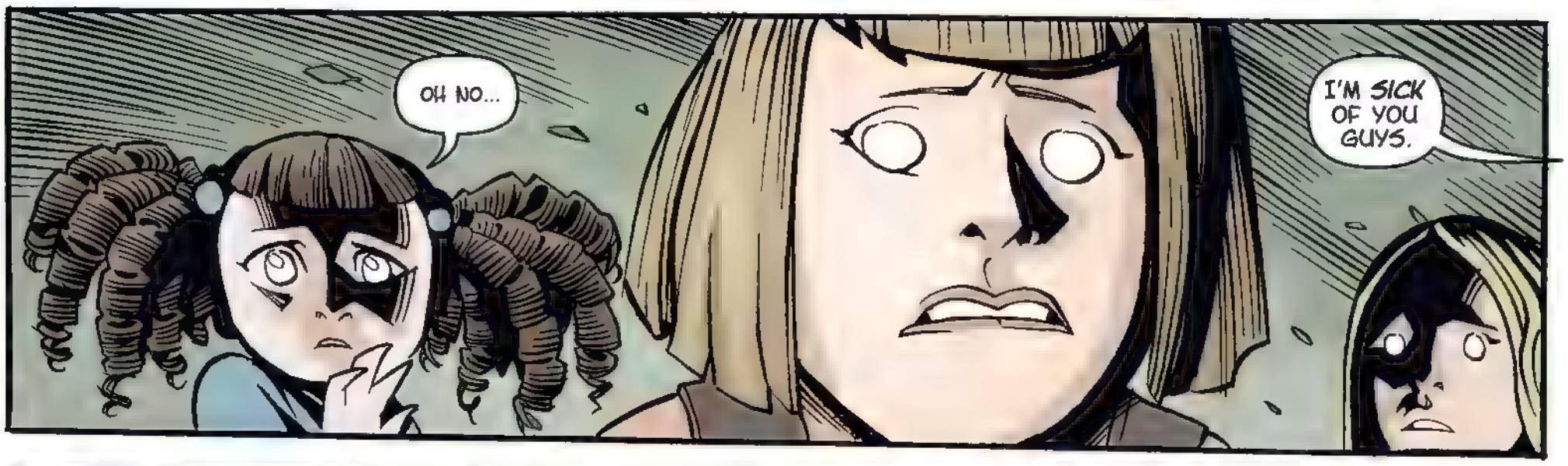

I GUESS YOU'RE OUT OF LUCK AGAIN!
HEY!

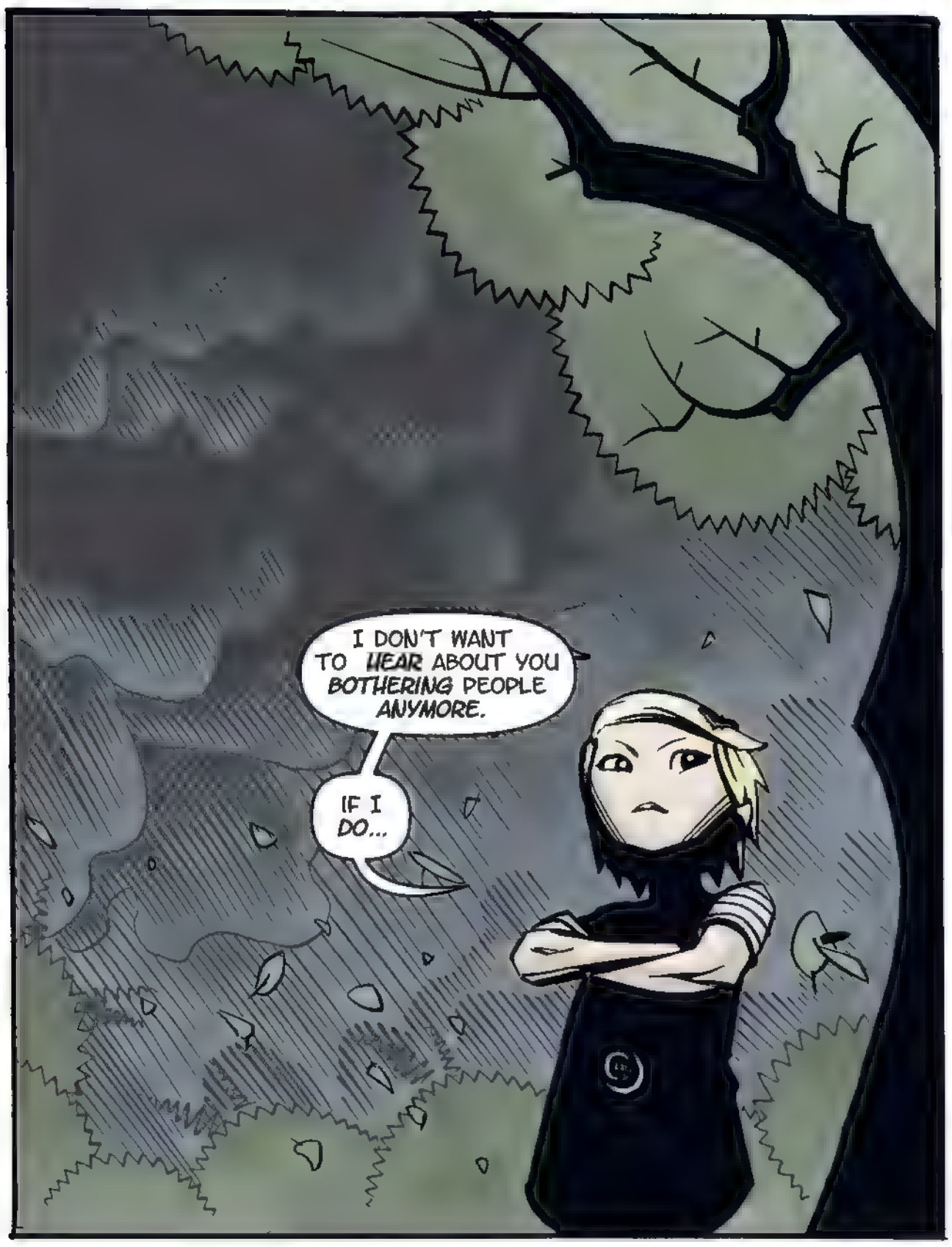
LEAVE HER ALONE, OR YOU'LL ALL BE OUT OF LUCK.

WHAT'RE YOU GONNA DO ABOUT IT, SKINNY?

THAT'S CRUMRIN, REMEMBER?
OOOOH, I'M WETTING MYSELF.
WHAT'S SHE GONNA DO? GIVE US ALL NIGHTMARES?

YOU WANNA FIND OUT?


OH NO...
I'M SICK OF YOU GUYS.


I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOU BOTHERING PEOPLE ANYMORE.
IF I DO...

YOU'LL FIND OUT EXACTLY WHAT COURTNEY CRUMRIN CAN DO.

AND *THAT* WERE THE *WAY* OF IT.

NO ONE EVER *FOUND* WHAT BECOME OF OL' MARSHAL *HECTOR*.

AFTER 'IS *DISAPPEARANCE*, THEY FOUND SOME *MIGHTY* INCRIMINATIN' STUFF IN 'IS *'OME*.

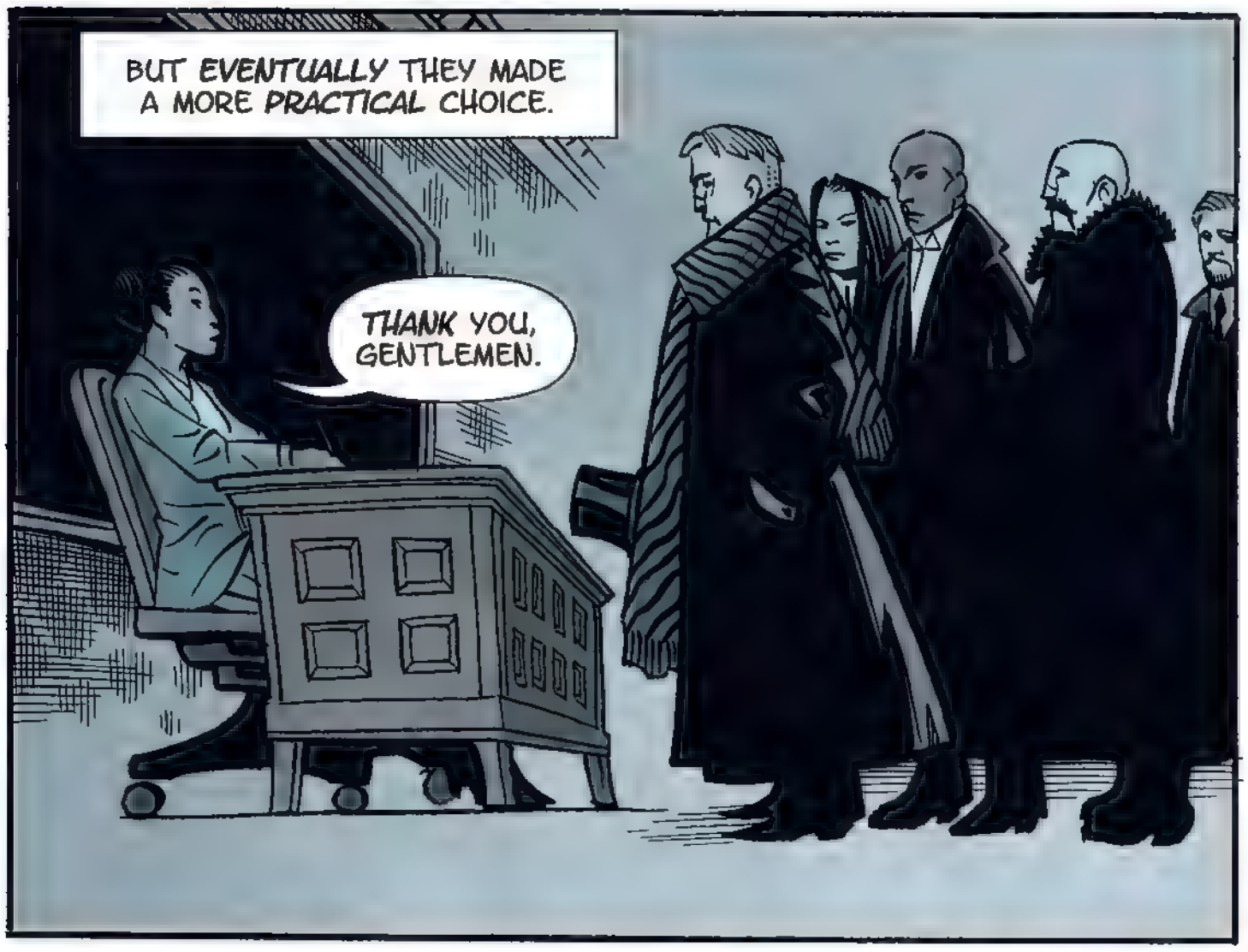
LOOKS LIKE PROFESSOR *CRUMRIN* WASN'T AS IRRATIONAL AS YOU *THOUGHT*, *EH*, WOODRUE?

POOR OL' *WOODRUE* DIDN'T COME OUT LOOKIN' TOO GOOD, *NEITHER*.

'COURSE THEY STILL HAD TO FILL THEM VACANT *SEATS* ON THE *COUNCIL*.

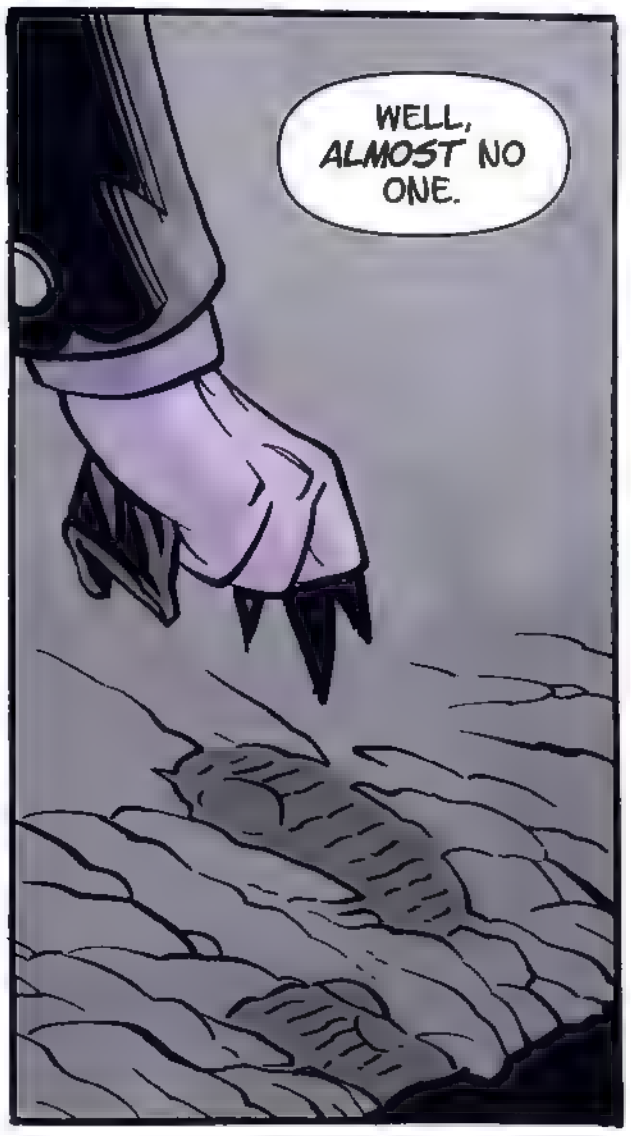
THEY *TRIED* ASKIN' OL' PROFESSOR *CRUMRIN*, FOR *SOME* SILLY REASON.

SLAMM!


BUT EVENTUALLY THEY MADE A MORE PRACTICAL CHOICE.
THANK YOU, GENTLEMEN.

I'LL GIVE YOUR OFFER DUE CONSIDERATION.

AND OF COURSE, NO ONE EVER SUSPECTED LITTLE MISS CRUMRIN O' FOUL PLAY.

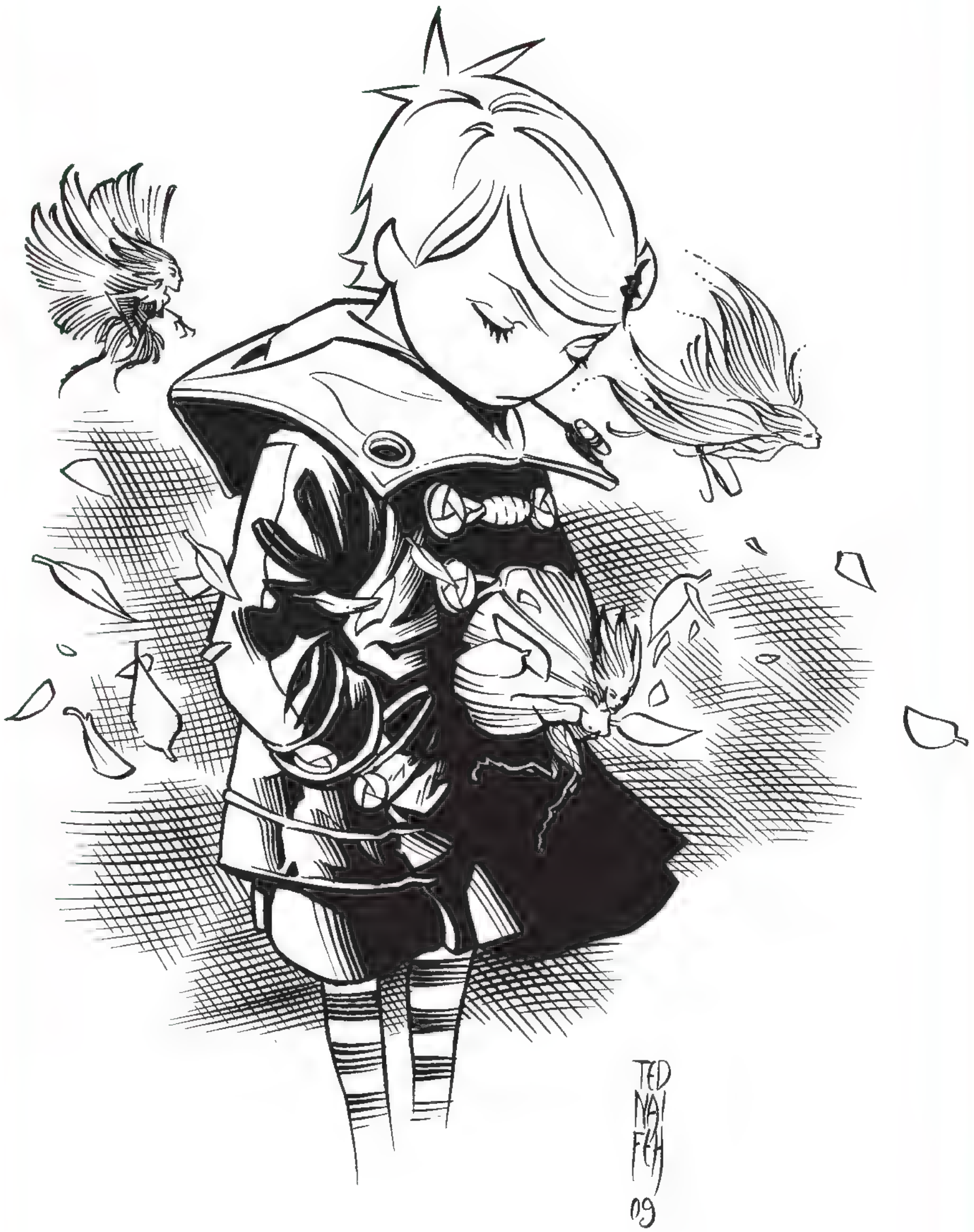

WELL, ALMOST NO ONE.

Courtney Crumrin

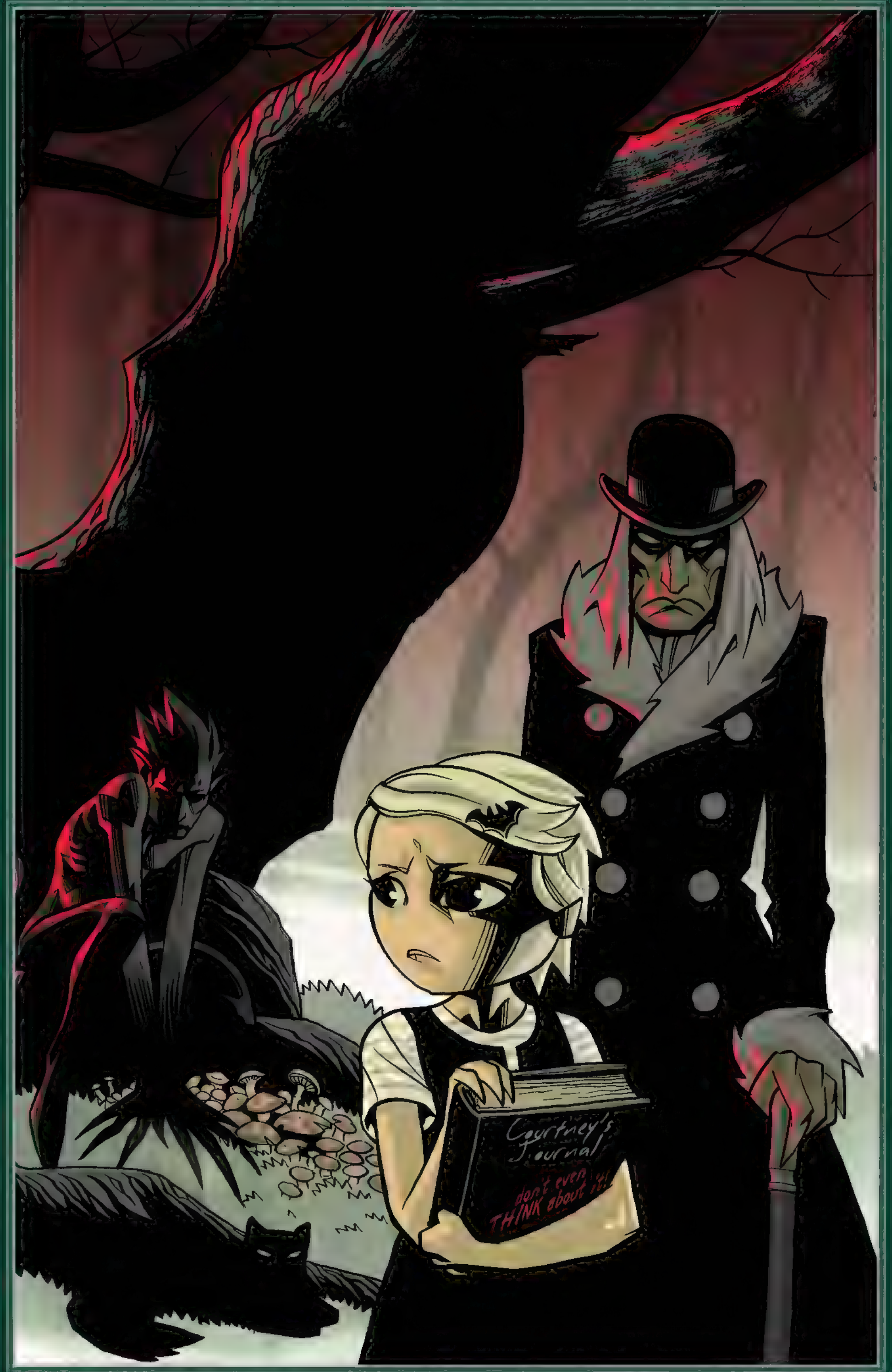
Volume Two

The Coven of Mystics

Bonus Material & Cover Gallery

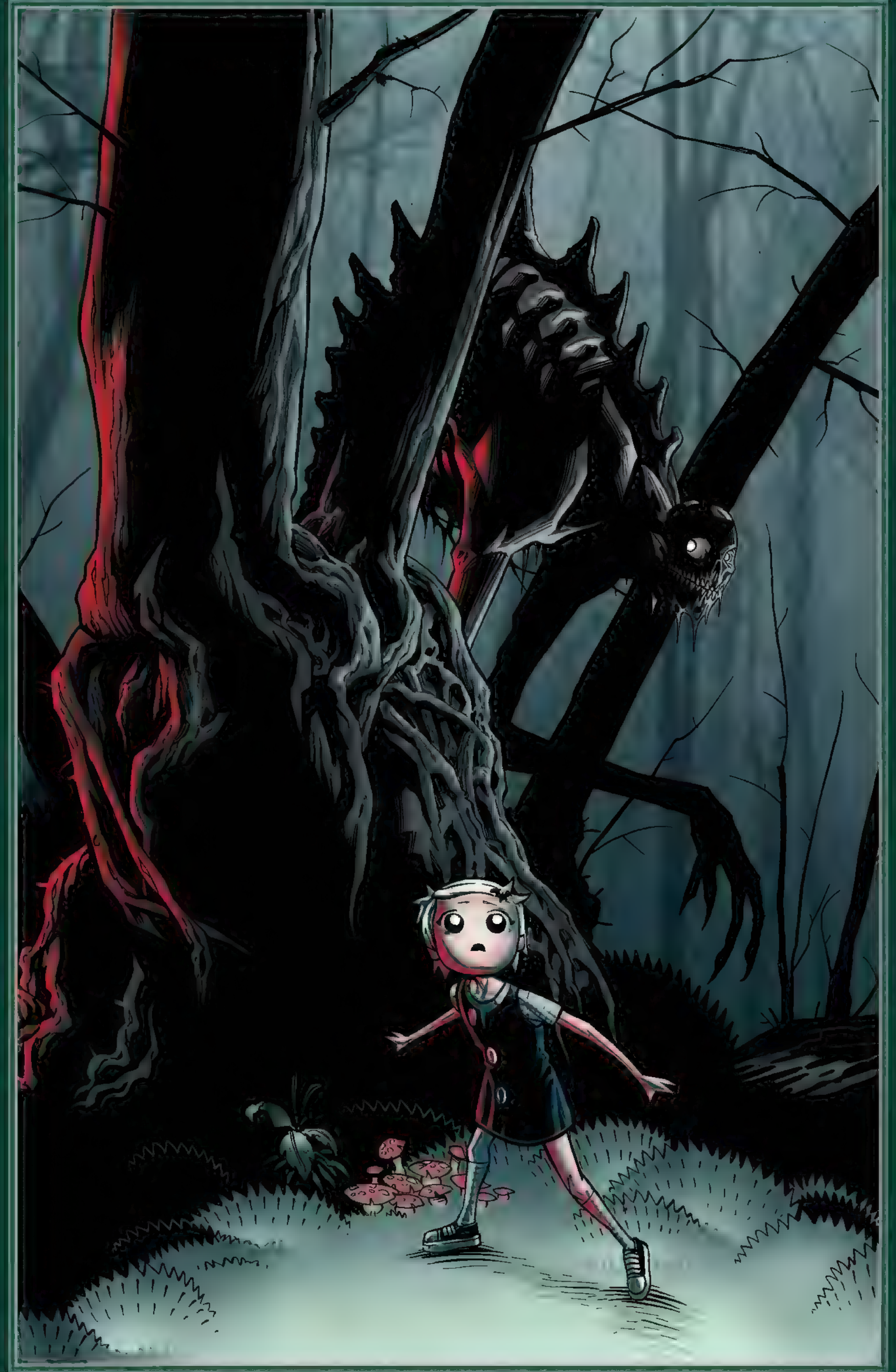


A pin-up drwaing of Courtney Crumrin drawn in 2009.



Original Cover for Courtney Crumrin and the Coven of Mystics.

Cover for the French Edition of *Courtney Crumrin and the Coven of Mystics.*



Cover for Issue 1 of *Courtney Crumrin and the Coven of Mystics*.

Cover for Issue 2 of *Courtney Crumrin and the Coven of Mystics*.

Cover for Issue 3 of *Courtney Crumrin and the Coven of Mystics*.

Cover for Issue 4 of *Courtney Crumrin and the Coven of Mystics*.

Ted Naifeh

Ted Naifeh first appeared in the independent comics scene in 1999 as the artist for *Gloomcookie*, the goth romance comic he co-created with Serena Valentino for SLG Publishing. After a successful run, Ted decided to strike out on his own, writing and drawing *Courtney Crumrin and the Night Things*, a spooky children's fantasy series about a grumpy little girl and her adventures with her Warlock uncle.

Nominated for an Eisner Award for best limited series, Courtney Crumrin's success paved the way for *Polly and the Pirates*, another children's book, this time about a prim and proper girl kidnapped by pirates convinced she was the daughter of their long-lost queen.

Over the next few years, Ted wrote four volumes of *Courtney Crumrin*, plus a spin off book about her uncle. He also co-created *How Loathsome* with Tristan Crane, and illustrated two volumes of the videogame tie-in comic *Death Junior* with screenwriter Gary Whitta. More recently, he illustrated *The Good Neighbors*, a three volume graphic novel series written by *New York Times* best-selling author Holly Black, published by Scholastic.

In 2011, Ted wrote the sequel to *Polly and the Pirates*, and illustrated several *Batman* short stories for DC Comics. He is currently writing and illustrating the ongoing *Courtney Crumrin* series, which will celebrate its 10th year in 2012.

Ted lives in San Francisco, because he likes dreary weather.

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By Ted Naifeh

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Courtney Crumrin

Volume Two

The Coven of Mystics

The *New York Times* best-selling series returns! Courtney Crumin's latest adventure pits her against the town's most powerful warlocks and witches—the Coven of Mystics! After an initial confrontation with the world's most terrible hobgoblin goes badly, the Coven decides it needs a scapegoat. The mystical council turns its ire on Skarrow, a creature of the dark in service to the town's most beautiful and reclusive witch. Knowing that disturbances of this kind are never so easy to explain, Uncle Aloysius dismisses the Coven's accusations, starting a curious Courtney down a twisted path to discover the true mastermind behind all the horror. But does Courtney stand a chance against a being as powerful and manipulative as the one waiting for her at the end of her journey?

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